

Winning strategies in marketing your sporting events.

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Title Annotation: A.D. [Ministration](#)

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Date: Jan 1, 2004

Words: 2019

Publication: Coach and Athletic Director

ISSN: 1087-2000

In an ideal world, high school sporting venues would be filled to capacity every week rather than maybe once a year.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The truth is that many school programs have a small fan base and that obviously limits their attendance. Many of their games draw little attention once you get by the players, coaches, friends, and family members.

In many of our venues, it is so quiet you can hear the fans talking to each other. The explanations range from the generally low level of competition, the heavy competition from the pros and colleges, other forms of entertainment, and often the lack of facility comfort.

What can an entrepreneurial athletic director or coach do about all of this? How can he increase spectator attendance and revenue and ensure school spirit and greater community support?

We would like to present six strategies that can help improve your interscholastic programs:

INCREASE THE VALUE OF YOUR PRODUCT

What separates your event from other events? It is the value that you place on it. If you cannot place a value on your program (games), how can you expect anyone else to do so?

If you happen to be located in a town or city where you are the only show in town, consider yourself lucky. If you are not that fortunate, you will have to compete for your fan base.

There are numerous ways to emphasize value on a specific event, including an admission price and charges for quality food, services, and merchandise.

An admission price places an immediate value on the event. People value things they have to pay for. Many athletic departments will waive admission on events "nobody wants to see."

Conclusion: An event can't be worth anything if it is being given away. Would a school ever hold a prom without charging a fee?

Looking at this simplistically: Too many empty seats equal too many unused opportunities to market your school, product, or program.

Another way to add value to your event is by providing good concessions. Food and drink has become an essential part of the spectator experience and fans are willing to pay for them.

Concession items should be reasonably priced. It is not a good idea to charge \$2 admission and then charge \$5 for a soft drink. People will feel they are being "gypped."

Fast and friendly service is also a cachet of a well-run concession stand. Workers can include parents, students, and the athletes from other teams involved in fundraising projects. Regardless of who they are, they should be conscientious, courteous, and well-trained while adhering to food-safety standards. Customers who appreciate fast and friendly service will come back.

A final way to add value to the sporting event is by providing merchandise such as key chains, pencils, banners, t-shirts, etc., at a reasonable price. The prices can range from under one dollar to more than \$20, but should never be severely marked up for fundraising purposes.

INCREASING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Another way to increase attendance is by focusing internally on the student population. The more students that are involved, the greater the fan interest and attendance.

A good way to increase student involvement is by developing a student-led spirit organization. A Student Spirit Booster Club (SSBC) can significantly bolster the student support of athletic events. Its sole purpose is to create enthusiasm for sporting events. The structure can range from highly organized student-led committees to informal gatherings at athletic events. The SSBC could have a specific mission such as pledging to provide student support by attending home games.

A partnership between the SSBC and athletic department personnel could be further developed through regular meetings and projects designed to improve school spirit and attendance at sporting events.

The members of the SSBC could brainstorm, present, and discuss ways to recruit and maintain student involvement and enthusiasm, while the athletic department should provide T-shirts that distinguish them from others groups at the events.

If properly cultivated, SSBC's enthusiasm can carry over to the general student population and provide a significant jump in student support for athletics.

Another way to increase student involvement is by offering incentives for attending the games. Students who attend a certain number of games can be awarded a free booster club T-shirt or opportunities to participate in various promotions throughout the year. Students may also be rewarded by sitting in a special section.

Students like to feel important and part of an exciting experience. Let them know that they make a difference, like being the sixth player on the court. Provide them with a sense of ownership by giving them responsibility such as helping at contests, marketing, promotions, and special events.

Allow the students to be creative in finding appropriate ways to cheer for their team.

INCREASING THE FUN

There are numerous ways in which to make a sporting event fun for the spectator.

Many teams will employ a team mascot to keep things entertaining. Everyone loves mascots because they are symbols of fun, the embodiment of school spirit, and make great ambassadors for their institution.

Imagine Mickey Mouse, Ronald McDonald, or Bugs Bunny handing out give-aways or hamming it up with fans at your next sport event. Creating or re-designing a mascot requires a certain degree of

creativity and input from students, faculty, and the community at large. The mascot can become part of pre, mid, and post game rituals that will enhance everyone's enjoyment.

He (or she) can be highly effective in creating school awareness, developing loyalty, and increasing attendance.

Your mascot can also make special appearances at local schools or shopping malls, or anywhere he can bond with potential fans and generate good will for your school.

Small children are especially fond of mascots and you should encourage the mascots to be liberal with their autographs. A good mascot can keep the kid coming back game after game. And remember, these children have to be accompanied by adults.

Cheerleading and dance-team squads may also add to the entertainment. Many bands and DJ's can facilitate crowd participation and interaction and help eliminate down time.

INCREASING MARKETING AND PROMOTIONS

The question now becomes: With all the choices that you have, what separates your athletic events from the others?

To really stand out, your program must provide the kind of service and entertainment that makes fans say, "Wow! I had a great time! Wow! That was a wonderful experience!" Or just, "Wow! I can't believe what they did!"

The goal is to make the contest a "Wow" event. It is not about generating an okay response from the fans. It is about exceeding their expectations.

If you exceed their expectations, the reputation of your program will grow like wildfire. Fans will begin to recognize your efforts and reward you by continuing to return to the events while also telling other potential spectators about your program. In essence, your fans will become the greatest promoters of your program!

One method of creating a "WOW" event is by creating exciting promotions. If you want your fans to attend your events, you must first focus on their interests and needs. Ask questions such as "How can we get their attention?" "How can we get them involved?", and "If I were paying money to see an event, what would I want to see?"

Conduct contests at half-time and during intermissions to eliminate down time. Try to make the contest as interactive as possible. Give-aways are a good way to grab attention and boost attendance. One creative approach is to have coaches and team members promote and/or participate in the activities.

INCREASING PUBLICITY AND EXPOSURE

Think television, radio, newspaper, billboards, e-mail, etc. Television is typically the most highly acclaimed form of publicity. When fans hear your game is going to be televised, their perception will be, "This is going to be a big deal."

Most high school events are not televised. Many of the major networks, magazines, or newspapers won't be covering your school. Do not let this discourage you! Try to recruit a community paper or a local cable station.

Perhaps your local cable station or community newspaper will be more than willing to cover a few events. The local cable station may even provide commentators and do the game free of charge. You

will never know unless you ask.

Once you secure effective media coverage, it will likely have a domino effect on spectator attendance and team support.

Create win-win relationships by giving the coaches and players a chance to star outside of the playing arena. For example, have coaches contact a local restaurant to host a live radio show or re-play a specific contest on a big screen TV, allowing the viewers to interact with the players and coaches.

Also, encourage coaches and players to meet and greet teachers, fans, parents, and business owners at a restaurant or other center in town. The restaurant will receive more traffic, fans will get to meet the team and sit and talk with the coach, and more interest will be generated in the athletic program. This kind of exposure provides great fan support.

E-mail is another inexpensive way to solicit fan support. Send your fans a personalized e-mail invitation to the next game or function.

It will make the fans feel part of the team and also keep them informed on what is going on in the school. The e-mails may also serve as a link to your team Web sites for pictures, team statistics, and notification of upcoming events.

INCREASING COMMUNITY FOCUS

"Potential fans" are the people who make up your community but do not regularly attend your events. How can you target these prospective fans and supporters?

Cliche: You have to spend money to make money. There is no better way of creating an awareness of your product than by give-away promotions and samples such as free tickets. Once you get them into your arena, you can impress them with your product and keep them returning.

You are now ready to develop your game plan. For example, if your target audience is youth, visit every local school, recreation center, and youth association and get to know the key contact people of the target groups.

Provide them with tickets and publicity flyers. Have your coaches spend time talking with them or working on a service project. Use the free tickets as an educational incentive. Reward students for good behavior (i.e., free admission for good grades). This is sure to make a good impression on your community.

By giving more, you will get more. Although you may not see substantial gains from sales on the front end (before the contest), you will see an increase in your bottom line from ticket, concession, and merchandise sales on the back end.

While it is a good strategy to "invite" community groups, it is a better strategy to "involve" them in your event through half-time shows or pre-or post-event functions.

Again, this is a win-win approach. The community groups win because they get a chance to perform or be involved with a large audience. Your program wins because you receive free entertainment, which can increase attendance.

Examples of community groups to invite: local middle-school cheerleaders, school bands, gymnasts, "pee wee" teams, ROTC, and specialized groups.

CONCLUSION:

Not all schools are fortunate enough to have courts or stadiums that are filled to capacity. But attendance can be significantly increased through various strategies.

The entrepreneurial athletic department that is willing to adopt the aforementioned strategies will have a sizable advantage. By increasing value, student involvement, fun, promotions and marketing, publicity and exposure, and community focus you will see an exponential increase in attendance and sales within your scholastic sporting events.

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