AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Strategic PR Plan: WNBA

Expanding the Fan-base, Increasing Exposure, and Getting People to Care

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A public relations plan aimed at improving game attendance, merchandise sales, and overall profits of the WNBA by expanding the fan base, increasing brand exposure, and by turning casual followers into loyal fans.

Campaign Goals

Objective One: Expand Fan Base

While the WNBA boosts one of the most diverse fan-bases of all professional sports leagues in the United States, their audience is largely a niche fan base. The WNBA audience while diverse in ethnicity and race lacks a specific depth in terms of social economic status, gender, age, life stage, and family style. The WNBA profiles their audience as the following:

- Female 58%
- Ages 12-17 27%
- Ages 18-34 31%
- Ages 35-54 26%
- HHI \$75,000+51%
- Attended College+ 58%
- One plus Children in the HH 73%

Ultimately, the goal of objective one is to expand and diversify the fan base further while maintaining appeal to the current fan base.

Objective Two: Increase Exposure

The WNBA faces difficulties increasing its fan base because the WNBA brand has little visibility in the professional sports market. Increasing exposure is important because brand awareness can lead to fan conversion in the long term. Increasing exposure is also key to changing the WNBA's niche fan base to a mass fan base.

Objective Three: Get More People to Care

The WNBA's current fan-base is listed as 25 million people in the United State. Of these 25 million fans, only 1.5 million attend WNBA games. This 23.5 million person difference is the disparity between casual fans and caring fans. The WNBA is in severe need of loyal fans. Loyal fans are the most profitable fans as this group attends games, purchases merchandize, and generate buzz about the league. In addition to attracting more fans, converting casual fans into avid fans will increase game attendance, sales profits, and will help the brand become more visible to the general public.

Situation Analysis

Internal Strengths

- Association with NBA
- Contract with ESPN
- NBA TV shows games

Internal Weaknesses

- Low fan loyalty, high number of causal fans
- Poor perception, mocked by general public

- Limited funds
- While players are talented, games are slower than NBA games and men's NCAA games

External Opportunities

Season starts in May, fill void for men's basketball with starts in late October

External Threats

- Other sports that go on in the summer act as competition
- Regardless of the increase in televised games; the number of televised games is still comparably low when comparing to men's sports of all kinds

Evaluation of Potential Audiences

Target Audience 1

The WNBA should target current loyal NBA fans that are likely to want to watch basketball beyond the NBA season. This audience's specific need can be filled by the WNBA as the WNBA's season begins just as the NBA's season ends and the WNBA's season ends just as the NBA's season starts.

Target Audience 2

The WNBA should target teenage and younger girls who play basketball. Their families should also be targeted. Currently, the WNBA is largely family orientated as it offers games and events at lower costs than the NBA and many other professional sports leagues. WNBA players can be marketed as strong female role models for girls from elementary school through high school.

Target Audience 3

Many fans of college basketball do not enjoy the style of play or the high salaries of the NBA. College basketball fans like the sport at the collegiate level because the players are more venerable to errors and because of the deemphasize on single players leading teams through games. Similarly to the NBA, the college basketball season ends when the WNBA's season begins leaving a void for basketball that WNBA can fulfill.

Suggested Audience Research

Focus Groups

Current WNBA fans can provide insight as to what attracts them to the WNBA and why they are either an avid fan or a casual follower of the WNBA. Due to the diversity of the WNBA's fan base, one can conclude that different people are interested in the WNBA for different reasons. Understanding these different reasons would allow the WNBA to better understand its own assets.

Current NBA fans are valuable to the WNBA and understanding NBA fans' reasons for their loyalty to the NBA as well as their perceptions of the WNBA would help the WNBA understand both possible shortcomings with the WNBA as well as possible ways to attract NBA fans.

Young girls, teenage girls, and families are critical audiences to understand as their fan-base value is very high. Using focus groups to gain an in-depth assessment of young girls' perceptions of women's professional basketball and their understanding of the WNBA brand can provide insight to whither young fans have a long term fandom in the WNBA or a short term interest.

Group interviews of WNBA players can provide unique insight into the WNBA audience as the players travel and meet many of the fans and therefore understand many of the positive and negative attitudes towards the WNBA.

Location/City/Sports Team Research

Assessment of the of WNBA teams' individual fan base demographics can provide important information as to why fans gravitate towards the teams they follow. While the primary reason for fandom is close geographic proximity to the team's home city, secondary reasons such as cultural associations, family traditions, team records, and image perception are just as important to understand. Through surveys, ticket and merchandize sales information, and other relevant and available information fan loyalties can be better understood. This information is particularly crucial for attracting NBA fans. The WNBA league itself cannot alone attract fans; individual WNBA teams must attract fans. For instance, in getting NBA fans to become fans of the WNBA, Chicago Bulls fans will be targeted as potential Chicago Sky fans and Los Angeles Lakers or Clippers fans will be targeted as potential Los Angeles Sparks fans.

Rebranding Strategy

Logo

The WNBA's current logo has been redesigned to an orange rectangle with the classic figure dribbling a basketball. This orange logo is too different from the NBA logo. Up until 2012, the WNBA's logo was a female figure dribbling a basketball within a red, white, blue emblem. The NBA's logo is nearly identical to the WNBA's logo but is a rectangle with a male basketball player. The similarities between the WNBA's older logo and the NBA's current logo allowed for people to make a visual connection between the two organizations. This connection is an asset to the WNBA as such an association with the NBA provides the WNBA with a sense of credibility. Reinstating the original WNBA logo or altering the current logo to more closely mimic the NBA's logo will associate the WNBA more closely to the NBA.

Expand Fan Base

Location-Based Campaigns

Target Audience: NBA fans

Message: The WNBA can fill your needs for watching basketball in the NBA offseason.

The focus of the location-based campaigns will be getting fans of specific NBA teams to start following and becoming fans of the WNBA team in the same area as their favorite NBA team. To accomplish this, close associations must be made between same-city or close location NBA and WNBA teams. For instance, the season schedule for the Indiana Fever should be in the game day programs for Indiana Pacers home games. A couple of Fever players should be present at Pacers home games and be involved in half time court charity promotions. Additionally, Fever players should be connected with Pacer players who are invested in community charity organizations and use the bigger names of the NBA players to promote the names of the lesser-known players of the WNBA. Video news releases, written

news releases relevant print and online news sources should be released at relevant times during both the WNBA season and the offseason. These news releases should cover everything from game highlights to players' personal lives to WNBA charity events and merchandize features.

College Basketball Fan Targeting

Target Audience: College basketball fans who do not necessarily enjoy or follow the NBA

Message: The WNBA is different from the NBA and the WNBA can fill the void for basketball in the offseason for college basketball.

College basketball fans are more challenging to target than NBA basketball fans because there is less geographic constraints to team fandoms and more diverse reasons for people to like and follow certain college basketball teams. For instance, a person can be a fan of a particular school team because he or she is an alumnus, live or lived near the school, a family or friend likes the team, the team makes the finals regularly, or another reason. To attract college basketball fans, the WNBA must highlight the differences between itself and the NBA and the similarities between itself and collegiate basketball. This may seem counterintuitive given that the WNBA also uses its association with the NBA to its benefit; however, to reach this audience positioning the WNBA closer to collegiate basketball than to the NBA will make it easier for college basketball fans to be interested in the WNBA.

Since all WNBA players attended college, most of which with strong men's and women's basketball teams, the WNBA should work to get representative players and coaches from each WNBA team access to NCAA tournament games and press events. Other WNBA players can act as sports analysis and experts to their home local news coverage and do interviews giving their insight about the playing and then give a plug for the upcoming WNBA season start. The WNBA should also provide Women's NCAA teams with player profiles so that schools can include WNBA player profiles in the game day programs of WNBA players' school teams. The WNBA should also send WNBA players on trips to their alma maters to attend opening games where the school can make announcements of their accomplishments. These tactics work at the incentives of both the WNBA and the universities of NCAA teams as the WNBA gets press and the universities and their basketball teams are shown to produce professional players.

Reaching Basketball Playing Girls and their Families

Target Audience: Young basketball playing girls and their families

Message: Parents/Guardians: The WNBA is a family friendly and affordable professional sports league that has strong role models for children. Teen Girls and Younger: WNBA features strong, talented, hardworking players who are living a dream that you should aspire to have as well.

To reach parents with the message that the WNBA is a family friendly and affordable professional sports league the WNBA should create press releases for news sources that parents read. For example, these featured articles can highlight the benefits of girls having positive female role models or the importance of girls exercising and make connections to the WNBA. In targeting teenage girls and

younger, the WNBA should focus on the aspirations of the young girls and their desires to look up to strong female role models. To make a connection to the aspirations and opportunities of young basketball playing girls, the WNBA should reach out to schools, camps, and community recreational centers where WNBA players can make appearances at relevant events. Additionally, WNBA players should make appearances in children's television programs promoting exercise, a healthy lifestyle, and, by default, the WNBA.

Increase Exposure

There are four suggested campaign components focused on increasing brand exposure among different demographics within the United States. All of the components are designed to reach the mass public as well as the specific audiences listed above. The suggested campaign components are online video mini-series, entertainment media coverage, video news releases, and establishing corporate relationships and sponsorships between star players and companies.

Online Video Series Campaign

Target Audience: Young and teenage girls; NCAA basketball fans, NBA fans

Message: The WNBA features young, fun, hardworking players who are talented athletes who are fun for fans to watch play basketball.

Communication Vehicle: Several short five to seven minute online videos that feature WNBA players

Online videos that are comical and feature WNBA players in a candid, light hearted setting can reach a young, educated, urban and suburban audience. These videos can embody the underdog and hard-working values of the WNBA. Pepsi's video campaign called "Uncle Drew" is a prime example of such successful online outreach. "Uncle Drew" is an online video series that features NBA player Kyrie Irving dressing up as an elderly man and outplaying street players in games of pick-up basketball. A proposed WNBA video series equivalent can enjoy the same success and evoke similar feelings of humor and fun as well as showing off the high level of skill and talent of WNBA players. These videos can accomplish a powerful change in perception towards WNBA players. These videos can strike a direct comparison between WNBA players and male street players as opposed to the common current comparison between WNBA players and NBA players. Given that the average WNBA player can outplay the average male street player; this video series can remove the focus from comparing NBA and WNBA players and focus on comparing WNBA players with regular Joes who think they can outplay WNBA players.

If after the video series campaign is successful at the initial launch then plans for using online video series should begin. The format of short online videos are applicable to other target audiences any can be developed to convey many different messages. For instance, short videos that follow a day or year in the life of a WNBA player can be crafted to target young girls with the message that shows them that WNBA players are hard-working, admirable women on and off court.

Entertainment Media Coverage

Target Audience: The general public and NBA, NCAA fans, and basketball playing girls and their families

Message: WNBA players have interesting personal lives, interesting backgrounds, and are strong well-rounded basketball players and people.

Communication Vehicle:

The WNBA should select the strongest WNBA players from each team and conduct interviews to find out the players that have friendly and personable personalities who would be comfortable in interviews and with the media. From this group of players, the WNBA should find the players with interesting lives and backgrounds and work to create a narrative that can be told through interviews on sports shows and entertainment programs. This select group of eight to ten players should do rounds of press at the start of the WNBA season and at any other appropriate time such as a personal record or feat or during the playoffs. While the WNBA may not be capable of getting their players onto strong primetime interview times, any interview times would steadily increase exposure amongst both the general public and the selected target audiences. Examples of ideal interview spots are short interviews on early morning shows such as the Today Show or Good Morning America or sports morning shows on ESPN or paid-for sports channels. WNBA players can fill the last position interview that typically goes to lesser known interviewees on late night interviews on sports channels or main stream late night shows such as Late Night with Jimmy Fallon. On these late night shows, WNBA players can tell their well-crafted background stories, engage in basketball-themed games, and promote their team and the WNBA league as a whole.

Sponsorships

Target Audience: The general public and current NBA fans who are looking to watch basketball in the NBA offseason.

Message: The WNBA has star players that make the games interesting to watch.

The WNBA should create a star culture in the WNBA and make six to ten players highly visible in the public eye so that people will become more aware of the WNBA. This star culture works to increase exposure of the brand and to get more people to care about the brand. For creating awareness, developing corporate relationships and endorsements will increase individual player visibility. The recommendation is for the WNBA to select top WNBA players who have interesting backgrounds, personalities, personal lives, and playing styles and put them into the media spotlight. The WNBA can work to form endorsements for some top players with their corporate sponsors that would feature the players on all forms of print and video advertising.

Video News Releases (VNR)

Target Audience: The general news watching public

Message: Depends on content of the news release; shows the WNBA and its players in a positive light The WNBA should partner with special interest groups such as organizations that support related causes to the WNBA at relevant times. For instance a partnership with a girls youth basketball organization can lead to creating a news story about the increase in opportunities in girls playing basketball. The WNBA should make VNRs whenever a team wins a game and send it to local news and sports news stations. Additionally, VNR should also be created for major WNBA events and personal events for the WNBA's top eight to ten players that the WNBA are trying to turn into stars.

Getting People to Care

Creating Player Narratives

The WNBA must construct narratives of the top WNBA players that highlight their rise to stardom, the obstacles they overcome, their personal lives, and where they are from. These personal narratives are important as stories allow people to care more about the players and therefore fans will be more likely to want to keep up with their favorite players and team. The development of player stories is important for interviews, media events, charity and community outreach events as well as any time the players make public appearances. Personal stories allow fans to feel closer to players and feel sympathy towards their experiences. These personal connections cause fans to root for players and teams at a deeper level than they would if they did not feel emotionally connected to the favorite player's stories.

Game Day Fan Experience

The game attending experience is important for fans for several reasons. Firstly, a good fan experience at a game will cause fans to tell their friends, family, and/or neighbors about the positive experience they had attending a WNBA game. This buzz is important as it allows people to gain a positive impression of the WNBA from a trusted source. Games are also an opportunity to promote the individual WNBA teams as well as the WNBA brand as a whole. Traditions such as half time competitions, fan songs, mascot dances, or promotions unique to each arena can make a game-going experience unique and special. For instance, the Boston Red Sox's Fenway Park sells "Fenway Franks" which is nothing more than a simple hotdog; however, the name "Fenway Frank" makes it a staple of the Fenway Park game-going experience.

Community Outreach

Of all professional athletes in the United States, WNBA players likely have the highest community engagement. Given the relatively tight restrictions on player salaries in the WNBA, most WNBA players play or coach professionally in the off-season or have careers external to professional basketball. The hard-wording nature of most WNBA players can be highlighted in media outlets and through community engagement. Community engagement particularly reaches families and young girls interested in playing basketball. Sending WNBA players to youth basketball camps, sports expos, and community sports centers can cause young people to become quacking engaged with the WNBA. For instance, a member of the Chicago Sky could attend the opening of a basketball court for community

recreational center in Chicago. At an event like this, the player can engage with local youths, show kids techniques of the game, and sign autographs. Photos and video can be taken for press releases and VNRs.

Final Plan Notes

The combination of these campaign elements will allow for strong targeting of the three audiences that are most likely to become fans of the WNBA. Additionally, general public reach in combination with the strong personal elements of the campaign will cause the brand exposure to the general public as well as creating in depth personal attachments to players of the WNBA. This plan will be able to both attract new fans to the WNBA and convert casual followers into loyal fans. Through expanding the fan base, increasing exposure, and gaining loyal fans, the WNBA will experience higher game attendance, better merchandise sales, and more positive buzz concerning the WNBA brand. This positive buzz will perpetuate more positive brand buzz.

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