

What It Takes To Run With the Bulls

So you think your business has its ups and downs?

Try owning a professional sports franchise.

In Chicago, there has never been an extended run at the top like the NBA's Bulls experienced in the 1990's. The seats were sold out for an amazing 13 straight seasons, with Michael Jordan & Company earning a total of 6 World Championships.

What may surprise you is that even after MJ's departure, the Bulls have consistently achieved #1, #2 or #3 attendance figures among all the teams in the NBA.

How have they been able to sell tickets like that, even in years when the team has performed below expectations?

They've done it by selling the NBA experience... the product of the product.

"We're in the entertainment business," says Dave Dowd, Director of Ticket Sales for the Bulls. "From the moment fans walk through the door, there is non-stop entertainment. Fans are able to experience thrilling NBA action, and exciting game entertainment elements such as the Luvabulls, Benny the Bull, the Bucket Boys, the Breakabulls, amusing contests, halftime shows and concourse bands. Win or lose Bulls games are a perfect opportunity for people to enjoy time with friends and family, and for businesses to entertain clients in an effort to retain business, help them close new business or even improve employee morale. The game presentation and 'party-like' atmosphere, centered around what hopes to be an exciting and competitive game, make this an event people don't want to miss."

Yeah, Dave, but after the MJ Years, the expectations were so high for a winner. How were you able to sell the Bulls so well when the chips were down?

"This is a cyclical business. If you average out every team's won-loss record over time, it comes out to about .500. Fortunately, senior management had the foresight to realize that the glory years would not last forever. So in the early 90s we began a waiting list for season tickets and a relentless pursuit of 'growing' new fans while capturing their information. Our database has grown significantly since then, and this has served as the foundation of our telemarketing and e-marketing sales success ever since. Additionally, we're very fortunate to be in a great market with great sports fans, and to have a state-of-the-art arena, the United Center."

The Bulls are coming off of a great year, and the excitement seems to be back. How different is it today to sell than, say, two or three years ago?

“There’s no question that it feels great to be on the rise again; however, in terms of our sales strategy, not much has changed quite frankly. Although the team’s recent success is certainly helpful, we still emphasize the overall entertainment experience and NBA excitement. The fact is in the wintertime Chicagoans look for an escape, and way to entertain themselves, business associates, friends, and family. We fill this void, along with a very important need in the community, and deliver a product consumers perceive to be a good value for their money relative to the overall experience.”

What lessons do you think a business owner might learn from your success?

“The three main reasons we remained successful during the ‘lean’ years were our long-term planning, continued focus on providing the absolute best customer service, and our ability to creatively adapt to changes in the marketplace. We wouldn’t be where we are today without our name generation programs, which we’re constantly evaluating, that have greatly contributed to our telemarketing success. Our aim to continuously exceed our fans expectations from a customer service standpoint, and ability to ‘change with the times’ in terms of technology, staffing and sales strategy to meet our goals, has yielded great dividends as well.”

And now, with the team in winning form once again, the Bulls are in the best position possible for success.

Your business can benefit from what Dave’s sales team has done so well; identify why people buy what you sell, and emphasize that in your sales and marketing effort.

People don’t buy sandpaper because they want to own sandpaper. It’s because they want something to be smoother, which is the “product” of sandpaper. People buy Bulls tickets not for the piece of paper with the date and time stamped on it, but for the unique entertainment experience it allows them.

What is the product of YOUR product?

The answer may be just what you should be talking about in your next sales meeting.

By the way... the Bulls start their regular season next week, and season tickets, 11-game plans and group tickets are available by calling 312.455.4000. Also, individual tickets for every Bulls 2005-06 home game are now on sale at the United Center box office, Ticketmaster outlets, online at Bulls.com, or by calling 1.800.4NBA.TIX (1.800.462.2849).

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