



While fans can debate whether every market in the NHL is a success these days, there's little denying that hockey is seeing fan growth across the board, and not just hardcore fans. The growth of the league can be seen through several aggressive avenues on the marketing side, with outreach through social media, internet streaming, and allowing alternative media access to clubs and the league, as a whole. The results are being seen, not only online, but through television ratings and sponsorship growth.

Brian Jennings, the Executive Vice President of Marketing for the NHL, has been at the forefront of seeing the league through the tough times after 1994-95 lockout, to now, Jennings is seeing the league make a marketing comeback.

The Biz of Hockey caught up with Jennings last week to talk everything from how the NHL reaches out to new media, how the increase in ratings could influence future television deals, how to balance the success of the Outdoor Winter Classic with the possibility of diluting the event by having more than one game each year, plus more.

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Maury Brown for The Biz of Hockey: The NHL was an early adopter of reaching out to new

Written by Maury Brown
Wednesday, 19 May 2010 20:52

media, such as the conference call that took place on Friday that was exclusive to new media platforms. What drove you and the league to this direction?

"We recognize that the Internet is another media alternative that's had a major affect on how people get their news so this was just another leg of our digital strategy to help us keep up with the current generation of bloggers that have major influences in the online communities."

Brian Jennings: We recognize that the Internet is another media alternative that's had a major affect on how people get their news so this was just another leg of our digital strategy to help us keep up with the current generation of bloggers that have major influences in the online communities. We want to create real dialogues in real time for all of our fans by providing them a horizontal experience across the online assets.

Brown: Print media has been hit by a number of factors, but as the industry has been hammered by the economy, outlets have cut back being able to send beat writers on the road with their market's clubs. Was the move to new media done in an attempt to fill that void knowing there was a solid core fan base that would be looking to keep updated on the NHL?

Jennings: With about 50% of our fans living outside of the market of their favorite team, we already offer a way to keep our fans updated about all of the clubs with NHL GameCenter Live. The new media initiatives are just an added value that gives fans even more behind the scenes access to the players and teams.

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Brown: Ratings have been up consistently for the league with U.S. network partners VERSUS and NBC. How do you see this playing into negotiations when these contracts expire after the end of next season?

Jennings: We have two very good broadcasting partners in the U.S. who serve are fans well with world class quality game production. Clearly having our ratings on the upswing and reinforcing how avid and engaged our fans are is an important element in any upcoming broadcast discussion.

Brown: On the “History Will be Made” campaign... Are their plans to air any of the spots on television programming outside of NBC and VERSUS?

Jennings: We do televise the spots on our own network (NHLN), as well as YouTube/Facebook etc.

Brown: The Outdoor Winter Classic has become a premier sporting event, expanding the league’s fan base. There has been talk that given its popularity, a second game each year would be conducted. Is there concern that the event’s popularity might become diluted with the additional game?

“There will be an announcement made about an additional outdoor game played in Canada next season.”

Jennings: There will be an announcement made about an additional outdoor game played in Canada next season. We think that this will engage the fans even more by giving them another

outdoor event to look forward to and it gets Canadian fans excited by bringing the game back from where it is said to be originated.

Brown: For every market that hosts the Winter Classic, there are 29 others that don't. Some of these markets are in warmer climates. How does the NHL market the event equitably and not oversaturated the markets that can host the event?

Jennings: The warmer climate markets give our hockey operations team a nice challenge and interesting story lines. We can't ever predict what the weather will be like in the colder markets – could rain, not be cold enough, etc. so those are the risks that our team must face in every single market.

Brown: The league has seen solid additions in key sponsors, whether that has been Bridgestone for the Winter Classic, or more recently, Honda, as official vehicle of the NHL. Is this a case of the league pursuing partners or the partners pursuing the NHL as an advertising platform?

Jennings: It goes both ways here- our team does a great job of reaching out and cultivating great relationships with our current and new sponsor candidates. We give the sponsors ample opportunities to reach our fan base through our assets, whether it's through our large scale events or online videos, while they market their products.

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