

OPINION



Child care centers in Queensland will have fun and colorful Australian Football League team theming.

Australian team using ‘Kool’ approach in cultivating fans

SITTING IN THE CAPITAL ONE ARENA in Washington, D.C., recently, our conversation turned to the presence of 18,000+ passionate NHL fans surrounding us. We agreed they’re the lifeblood of any professional sport club and whether they buy tickets, stream games, purchase merchandise, gamble, or join fan clubs, they drive the business success of the league and its teams.

That much “truth” is logical for any Sports Business Journal reader.

But then our chat turned futuristic. What if a sports organization could breed its future fans? Could actually clone their dying baby boomers (the lifeblood of pro sports) by taking a few DNA cells and inject or microchip the avidity gene into newborns?

Sounds dystopian (and very troubling), but a real issue the big leagues and their clubs face is recognizing North American sports fans, as was once presumed, are no longer a largely homogenous group of 18-54 white males. A sport-loving target with disposable income earmarked for purchasing cigarettes, beer, soft drinks, cars, tires and mufflers.

You remember that famously reliable demographic segment, don’t you? The one that watched sports on just three TV channels and occasionally mowed the lawn.

Granted, that was long ago, and while baby boomers are still around (now somewhere between 60 and 80), they’ve quit smoking, only drink wine or coffee and drive golf carts. They’re also less likely to attend games in person.

In many cases, they’ve either passed out, passed on or passed up the chance to learn new technology that would’ve kept them linked to their favorite teams.

This center is adjacent to Metricon Stadium and training grounds, home of the Gold Coast Suns.

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That brings us to the successor generations. This group is not as avid about sport, is much more diverse and has developed a sophisticated set of interests, hobbies, and technological distractions.

That’s not the issue.

Nimble marketers have long known how to handle changing demographics. Upheavals in age segments and distribution channels is common.

Where once there was a scarcity of networks, today we have thousands of streaming platforms and easily accessed content options. In other words, more ways to reach our fans. Or fail them.

There’s also more competition in the fight for mindshare or market share globally. In a digital/global economy, Manchester United is more well-known than the New York Yankees or Dallas Cowboys. And therefore, more efficient.

So, what’s a sports marketer to do?

How should they think about guaranteeing their owner a steady flow of cashed-up fans filling plush seats or digitally consuming the team at home via augmented reality or holographic advertising? How

can they ensure their work in 2023 will generate acceptable revenue in 2043?

If they work in a traditional sport (e.g., baseball), how do they replace their aging fan base? If their sport is not attractive to young people (e.g., curling), how do they leverage technology?

Clearly, there are no silver bullets, but there are examples we can draw from.

How about Australian Football League team the Gold Coast Suns, who have partnered with Kool Beanz to build four child care centers in Queensland, of which the largest of these facilities is literally connected to the team’s Metricon Stadium.

The team’s goal? Engage the local government and community while attracting young fans and diversifying revenue streams.

“Since our inception we’ve strived to mean more to our community than just [serving as] the Gold Coast’s AFL team,” said Mark Evans, the Suns’ chief executive. “We want to have a lasting impact on the next generation of talented children growing up on the Gold Coast and hopefully both on and off the football field.”

What makes this Aussie endeavor notable is knowing the Suns will initiate branding efforts on toddlers and preschoolers from the moment harried mothers, fathers, and guardians drop them off just inside a massive football-shaped portal.

And it shouldn’t surprise any of us if the setting those drooling children will find each morning at Kool Beanz center are locker room-style facilities reflecting the relationship between the AFL team, this Queensland community, and the educational care giver.

Looking at the story posted on the Suns website it’s clear this AFL team was not just thinking about the present but more likely two decades from now.

“Kool Beanz SUNS Harrup Park will be a [child care] centre like no other in Mackay, with purpose specific learning environments such as Art Studio, STEM Room, Library, Lego Room, Zen Garden and beautiful natural play spaces. [It will be] a one-of-a-kind inclusive centre that celebrates and acknowledges all children [and] the Kool Beanz handpicked team of experienced educators will deliver an exceeding educational program developed specifically to meet the individual interests and developmental needs of each child.”

Whoa! All of that for a 3-year-old.

Our translation? This one AFL team is thinking a lot more broadly about their future fans than anyone we know of in North America.

A second observation is asking if the child care crisis in the U.S. is a disguised opportunity. Can pro or college sports benefit from one business sector’s need and leverage it into a revenue-generating strength?

Possibly. Maybe caring about children and their well-being today can help forward-thinking teams protect and grow their future fan bases.

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