

The seven habits of highly effective media partners

BY ED DESSER AND JOHN KOSNER

10.17.2022



Recently, we wrote how the unique NBA on NBC partnership changed our industry and elevated the NBA (Sports Business Journal, Sept. 19, 2022). The friendship of visionary leaders Dick Ebersol and David Stern galvanized both organizations. But you don't have to be an industry icon to become an excellent media partner. It is a way of thinking about relationships, creating value for all. Here are seven pointers we've picked up from our experiences at the NBA and after:

1. The answer is "Yes!" The best way to build mutually beneficial relationships is to view the success of your partner as your success. Make your default to figure things out, which frequently will be contagious. When Bob Iger was CEO at Disney, he spoke often about the importance of optimism — bring that to your relationships!

2. Over-deliver: Doing more than what is expected makes an impression. When CBS broadcast the NBA, it used three to four replay devices. Moving to NBC, we wanted four or five. NBC made eight replay units standard, even for regular-season games. We did not have to ask. That approach pushes the other partner to go above and beyond too.

3. Anticipate needs: What's better than getting "Yes!" for an answer? Again, never needing to ask. For example, we knew which NBA arenas had poor lighting and/or camera locations. We took those challenges on ourselves, before partners complained. That spirit continues today as the NBA initiates technical enhancements that provide future solutions for the league's global broadcasters.

4. Know your partner's business (better than they do): That was quintessential David Stern — not satisfied with the NBA being experts of (only) our domain. Hyperbole? Sure! But the emphasis is right. We knew how important the Olympics were to NBC. That drove urgency in the formation and marketing of the 1992 Olympic Dream Team and all that followed. Did that success extend to the NBA? Of course, but that's the point of effective teamwork. The NBA was similarly instrumental to Turner, agreeing to switch from TBS to TNT once the latter reached 30 million subscribers (achieved in record time) — a possible streamer's tactic today.

More partnership examples from other sports:

■ When it renewed its deal with Fox in 2020, the NHRA knew the network had to hold multiple fall Sundays open for NFL doubleheaders, even though the NFL would only schedule single Fox windows on half of those dates. By planning a series of "playoff" races on several straight fall weekends, NHRA could guarantee Fox an event on at least one of those "singleheader" Sundays. On Sept. 18, following its NFL game, the NHRA on Fox drew 1.7 million viewers, its most-watched race ever.

■ In 2010, **ESPN** and **MLB**'s digital arm BAM were spirited competitors although ESPN was (and is) a longtime MLB rights holder. At ESPN, we knew the quality of BAM's streaming infrastructure and discussions revealed an opportunity: BAM was built for the baseball season, while our streaming needs were focused on college football and basketball. The result: BAM became a valuable "white label" solution for ESPN, setting the stage for Disney's eventual purchase of BAMTech five years ago.

■ Fox has a lighter event calendar in the spring. The Pro Bowlers Association developed a weekly "PBA Playoffs" series after college basketball ends, providing weekly content for Fox and an additional programming series for the PBA.

5. Forge true partnerships: In 1990, the NBA had a lot to prove when NBC scheduled a huge increase in games from the handful CBS had broadcast. To deliver the highest possible audience (and ad sales), we needed a great schedule. NBA scheduling savant Matt Winick and Ebersol worked together each summer to craft key matchups to maximize audience. In fact, Dick sat backstage during the NBA Draft (which NBC wasn't even carrying). An emphasis on similar "win-win" teamwork yielded a revenue-sharing approach, which strengthened NBC's and Turner's advertising businesses and ultimately paid the NBA hundreds of millions extra from sales growth. And in 1997, the partners combined to launch the **WNBA**, which just completed its 26th season!

The same partnership logic applies to smaller properties. The National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas is the sport's Super Bowl. In 2020, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association moved its full-season linear TV events package to Rural Media Group's RFD-TV/Cowboy Channel, securing added rights fees and a more comprehensive broadcast schedule. Rather than selling its direct-to-consumer product in a lucrative streaming deal to a third party, the PRCA doubled down, co-developing The Cowboy Channel Plus, a rodeo-oriented DTC product with its partner RMG.

6. Think big: Extraordinary relationships can deliver unheard-of innovation. Together, the NBA and NBC developed "NBA Inside Stuff," a weekly tween-targeted show about league personalities. We still hear from young fans who grew up watching it.

7. Finally, over-communicate! Schedule regular get-togethers. Plan a preseason summit meeting for executives from each company. Do a postseason debrief. Develop social relationships at your events. This fosters goodwill and leads to true successes, while minimizing the risk of the worst-case scenario: surprising your partner with bad news. And when you are dealing with bad news, remember, delivering that news quickly can actually be a gift — especially if the partners address the problem together. That's the value of a trusted relationship.

Considering today's myriad challenges and ever-increasing marketplace complications, being a good media partner is even more important. It's a state of mind, and way to get noticed!

Ed Desser is an industry expert witness and president of Desser Media Inc. (www.desser.tv). John Kosner is president of Kosner Media (www.kosnermedia.com). Together they developed league strategy and ran the NBA's media operations in the '80s and '90s.