“Everybody’s ability to manage and figure out the millennial fan and how that continues to unfold this year and over the long term is the most important issue in sports business.”

Brian France - Chief Executive Officer, NASCAR

As we head into 2015, there’s no question that the business of college athletics is thriving, due in large part to the launch and success of the College Football Playoff, significant television rights agreements, and the efforts of Conferences and University Athletic Departments to continually deliver on the needs and interests of fans. Innovation is fueling the growth of college athletics and will continue to do so over the next decade as the new media and technology arms race continues to unfold.

However, one of the biggest storylines that college administrators and marketers must continue to follow, understand, and address is innovating to meet the needs of the millennial fan base – a generation of recent [and future] college graduates born between 1978-95.

Why? A reported 67 percent of millennials claim to attend sporting events less often or never, and recent attendance indications reinforce how increasingly important it’s becoming for college administrators and marketers to capture this generation’s attention and loyalty now, as it will have a direct, lasting effect on the industry for decades to come.

Unfortunately, there is no one-size fits all solution for engaging the hard-to-reach millennial fan base, but the more that we can collectively understand and appreciate their needs, behaviors and consumption habits, the better suited we will be to capture their attention, loyalty and disposable income.

This piece is designed to help you better understand the millennial audience and provide some actionable ideas to help you re-think your current marketing and communications strategies to garner their attention and deliver the type of value and experiences they desire.
Millennials – Who Are They?

Millennials are a very powerful, influential, and informed generation of consumers that are changing the game when it comes to sports at both the professional and collegiate level. As the world’s largest and most impactful generation alive today, millennials represent 25 percent of the United States population (80 million) and are set to outpace Boomer earnings by 2018, with $2.5+ trillion spending power. This generation of fans (and hopeful season ticket holders), ranges from 19-36 years of age and will comprise 75 percent of the overall workforce by 2025.

The millennial audience is very attractive to college marketers and administrators because they are a very influential, connected audience segment who have a heavy impact on the purchasing decisions of others. Recent studies suggest that 74 percent of millennials influence purchase choices of other generations, 40 percent of whom use four or more sources when making purchasing decisions. Millennials want brands and organizations to deliver something useful and relevant to their lives and are very receptive (67 percent) to providing feedback after any good or bad experience.

Millennials are very different too, especially in relation to their affinity and consumption of sports. They are a generation with interests and expectations of live experiences that are radically different than generations before, craving interactivity, connectivity, control, and insider access on their personal devices. They are attending games less frequently, but that doesn’t mean they are less of a fan. Millennials simply have different means for consuming sports, opting for complete control of where and when they engage.

The Five Keys to Reaching and Engaging Millennial Fans

Over the next 2-3 years, college administrators and marketers should dedicate adequate time and resources to focus on capturing and connecting with this core audience, as current efforts will have a drastic impact on revenue streams for decades to come. To effectively do so, college stakeholders must fully understand this audience and develop specific strategies to innovate and communicate with this fan base in a very smart, targeted way using the following principles to drive their plan of action:

I. Deliver More Unique Online and Offline Experiences
II. Deliver More Digital Integration Into Live Events
III. Deliver More Personalized Storytelling Opportunities Across More Platforms
IV. Deliver More Music and Entertainment
V. Deliver More Locally Relevant Value

I. Deliver More Unique Online and Offline Experiences

When marketing to millennial audiences, it’s extremely important to identify ways to deliver unique, memorable experiences and access that they cannot get elsewhere.

Simply put, millennials want “the experience” – the moments that are personalized, relevant to their lives, and worth sharing with family and friends. Why? 81 percent of millennials say they value experiences over material items and 75 percent want brands to provide opportunities for more life experiences. Take a moment to think – what type of experiences and “real” access opportunities can you seamlessly create to stimulate the senses of millennial fans, both online and offline?

Experiences don’t have to be expensive, exclusive propositions either. Successful ideas and executions simply require college marketers and administrators to combine simple to create novel and deliver inclusive exclusivity, in other words unique experiences specifically created for recent alums. When developing an execution plan, it’s important to note that these types of experiences should be delivered on a sustainable basis throughout the year. Think of it as a drumbeat of fresh, value-drivers that keep millennial fans engaged on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Don’t take for granted that most millennial fans have never talked with a coach or former player (online or offline), walked on the field, gone in the locker room, or had their face/tweet featured on the scoreboard. These types of experiences are what turn the ordinary into the extraordinary for fans. These are the moments that convince millennials to turn off Netflix, pass up a viewing party with friends, and decide to take a full day out of their lives to enjoy your live game day experience.

How can your organization deliver these types of experiences for millennial fans in a turnkey manner? It may be worth considering benchmarking the NFL’s new Experience mobile app that allows fans attending games to purchase cheerleader and mascot visits in the stands, pre-game field experiences, birthday messages, seat upgrades, and more. In addition, consider creative ways to provide game attendees with a personal takeaway that delivers a lasting impact, similar to a
free game-specific downloadable photo frame template that fans can use to upload a photo into to commemorate their game experience with friends and family.

When crafting a strategic plan, just remember that delivering online and mobile experiences (in the channels millennials use) is just as important as delivering unique live game day experiences. As the first inherently digital generation, the ability for college marketers to deliver value to millennials via the second screen is integral to capturing their interest, attention, and willingness to engage and share content – both on game days and throughout the season.

Ideas for consideration include delivering:

- Personalized messages from coaches, players, personnel, and former players thanking millennial fans for their interest and/or attending live games / events
- Impromptu surprise and delight experiences at young alumni events, captured and shared via social media to all other young alumni groups and associations
- Exclusive social chats, pre-sale purchase opportunities, and personalized content

II. Deliver More Digital Integration into Live Events

The ever-evolving media and technology landscape makes it difficult for college marketers to fully understand the most effective ways to use digital, social, and mobile channels and technology to reach and engage millennial fans. With Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder, Google+, Pinterest, blogs, recruiting sites, and University/conference/media platforms, where do you start!

It may be hard to say but to start one must realize that for millennials it’s all about how technology enables their experiences, community, discovery of information, and connectivity to the world and their personal lives in particular. Technology must transparently add value to the fan experience, not be the fan experience.

College marketers and administrators have a key opportunity to leverage technology to help millennial fans: Discover the Unknown – Providing unique insights, statistics, and game updates that fans normally can’t access and delivering surprise and delight social/mobile experiences pre, during, and post-game for fans.

Access “The Best Of” – Providing tech utility to fans, allowing them to upgrade their seats, access unique live game experiences, see how long bathroom lines are, and order food and beverages directly from their seat. Also creating ways to engage with former players, personnel, and alumni throughout the game.

Share the Unexpected - Distributing unique, high-impact pieces of content “in the moment” and leveraging relationships with former players to post positive, congratulatory messages and personal insights during rivalry games, etc.

III. Deliver More Personalized Storytelling Opportunities Across More Platforms

The advent of social media and emerging, new technologies has empowered millennials to become the leading generation of storytellers, content creators, and curators. In fact, recent studies indicate that 79 percent of millennials post photos they've taken (vs. 52 percent of average consumers), 48% post videos they've taken (vs. 26 percent average of average consumers), and 61 percent actively share photos that others have taken (vs. 42 percent of average consumers).

As a result, college marketers and administrators must actively follow the lead of brands like Coca-Cola and AT&T among others and create varying levels of ways for fans to be a part of the story throughout the season [both live and
remote), offseason, and around historical moments and events. With millions of college sports fans actively communicating and engaging via social media, college marketers should look to find ways to let them actively be part of the story and help create it in their own personalized style.

Ideas for consideration include:

- Challenging and incentivizing millennial fans to curate and share content and make predictions for the chance to be prominently featured via online/offline channels
- Recognize and reward fans who share their compelling experiences live, at-home, and on the go
- Create a cause/community-based initiative rewarding fans with game perks as a reward for “giving back”

**IV. Deliver More Music And Entertainment**

When considering ways to attract and incentivize millennials to purchase season tickets and attend live games more regularly, college administrators and marketers should consider tapping into fans’ additional passion points to deliver value. Across the sports landscape, a significant number of brands and properties are actively beginning to leverage music, entertainment, food & wine, and live theatre relationships and assets in conjunction with sports to effectively reach and engage fans.

For most millennials, music is a significant part of their lives, while media and entertainment is an always around, always on, constant. A 2014 Crowdap and Iposos study in Mashable revealed that millennials spend 18 hours with media per day – split rather evenly across user generated content (30 percent), traditional media (33 percent), and other media channels (37 percent).

The key to success is finding ways to deliver unique and unexpected music and entertainment value to these millennial fans in a way that feels authentic in and around sporting events. If executed properly, these efforts can provide existing fans with an added dose of value while attracting the attention and interest of new audiences of casual and non-sports fans nationwide. When creating these types of experiences, it’s important to develop an action plan to create compelling content that millennial fans attending and watching at home can use to relive on demand and share with their family and friends post-event.

For example, the University of Michigan marching band called on Beyonce to film a special 15 second video board feature to kick start an incredible Beyonce-themed halftime show during the 2013-14 Notre Dame vs. Michigan game. While Beyonce wasn’t in attendance, the collaboration proved to be very powerful, with the band performing a series of her hit songs in front of 115,000+ screaming fans. The Michigan band did an incredible job capturing and sharing the performance online, generating 500,000+ views and attracting new audiences of fans across the world. The Michigan-Beyonce collaboration demonstrates the type of unique, expected value athletics programs can deliver for fans that can last a lifetime in fans’ memory banks.

College marketers interested in leveraging music and entertainment more actively should consider starting by developing a full audit of influencers who have a connection to the University (or the local college market) and can help influence and attract millennial fans to engage with content, and watch, listen, or attend games. These influencers can include athletes, musicians, entertainers, YouTube stars, food & wine personalities, actors, actresses, and more.

**V. Deliver More Locally Relevant Value**

A recent G/O Digital study revealed that millennial consumers don’t mind having their mobile viewing experiences at live events interrupted when brands deliver a valuable offer that solves an immediate, relevant need at the time (e.g. a coupon discount for concessions, merchandise, etc.). In fact, 56 percent of millennials say that they will share their location with a nearby company in return for a relevant coupon or promotional deal, especially if it means better access at events.

What does that mean for college marketers? There’s a clear opportunity to deliver value-drivers to millennial fans “in the moment” pre, during, and post live events at their greatest time of need. The key is delivering the right content, with the right context, at the right time.
As a result, many professional organizations have begun equipping their venues with beacon technology that provides brands with opportunities to intercept and provide value-drivers to fans in moments of high need. Examples include ping coupons/discounts to fans while they wait in line for concessions, and sending game information, high-impact content, experience opportunities, and queue alerts to fans walking through the stadium gates.

**Questions to Help You Get Started**

Interested in rethinking the way your organization is reaching and engaging millennials? Start by asking yourself these questions:

1. Is your messaging interesting or entertaining? Is it worth their time and worth sharing? Or are you simply asking them to donate money or purchase tickets?
2. Are you allowing millennials to participate?
3. Are you delivering unique experiences for millennials that they can’t get elsewhere?
4. Are you helping millennials give back or do something in a positive way?
5. Are you fitting into the millennial lifestyle and adding real meaning to their lives?

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