

NACDA  
2010 ATHLETICS ADMINISTRATION

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### THE ILLUSIVE FAN

All of us are engaged in the pursuit of “The Elusive Fan.” We need to identify them, communicate with them, sell them and retain them. That has become increasingly difficult for many institutions in light of the current economic situation in our country. Institutions are being asked to do more with less and stretch budgets and resources to their limits; however, the expectations of our fans have not lowered. Our society has become one of instant gratification and the expectation of relevant, personalized information and service. We live in the age of the individual. Our challenge is to meet the needs and expectations of our fans while staying within budgetary and resource limits.



Steve Hank



One way to meet the needs of a segment of our fan bases is by using technology. The Web, interactivity, text messaging and social media have taken a strong place in our society. This is especially true with the coveted younger next generation of fans. Professional sport franchises have typically taken the lead in providing relevant personalized communication with their fan bases. The Atlanta Falcons and the Miami Dolphins, in particular, have done an excellent job in this area. The interactive communications developed by these franchises utilize the information of the fan to create a unique personalized experience that immerses the fan into an environment that helps to create an emotional bond. The system also provides a mechanism with the fan to immediately speak with a team representative to purchase tickets. The teams also encourage the fan to share the experience with others by forwarding the message, thereby collecting a strong database of potential ticket purchasers not currently engaged in communications with the team. The collection of detailed contact information about potential customers not currently in your database is the most powerful aspect of viral marketing. It allows you to continue to have a dialogue with those potential ticket purchasers on an ongoing basis through multiple media types and to have them join the ranks of ticket purchasing fans.

Colleges and universities have traditionally not had the financial or internal resources to engage in this type of marketing on an individual basis. We compete fiercely on the court and field of play, but we do not generally compete for fans due to geographic differences. This provides us with the unique opportunity to work collectively to develop opportunities that would not be possible as individual institutions. By leveraging the collective power of five institutions — Arizona State, Boston College, Colorado, Georgia and Iowa State — and sharing the

infrastructure costs, this group was able to develop its own interactive communication platform at a fraction of the costs incurred by the professional franchises. Our group of five institutions worked cooperatively with Blind Society ([www.blindsociety.com](http://www.blindsociety.com)), an interactive and alternative marketing firm based out of Scottsdale, Ariz., to create the interactive communication media platform that leverages the power of the group while meeting the individual needs of each institution. By working together, the group was able to achieve things that would not have been possible as individual institutions. The athletics programs, and therefore our respective fans, were the beneficiaries. The products of our cooperation can be found at the following sites:

**Arizona State:** <http://www.youareasu.com>

**Boston College:** <http://www.wearebostoncollege.com/>

**Colorado:** <http://www.joinyourteam.com>

**Georgia:** <http://www.coachmarkfox.com/>  
<http://www.coachjayclark.com/>

**Iowa State:** <http://www.cyclone1nation.com/>

The institutions were able to engage their fans by attaching the viral video sites above to their current traditional media assets such as TV, radio and newspaper ads in addition to using e-mail, Web site and social media efforts to drive traffic to the viral video sites. The sites also received coverage from major media outlets such as ESPN.com and *USA Today*, along with a host of local media. This coverage and exposure, in addition to the viral nature, generated more than 75,000 unique visits to the Arizona State site alone. More than 21 percent of the fans who visited the site forwarded it to a friend. Similar results were found at the other institutions. The collection of the name, e-mail address and phone number of each visitor allows for personalized follow-up communication with the fan. The personal approach of the interactive video and the follow-up communications with the fan deepens the bond between the fan and its respective institution.

This technology is a tool that is available for use by institutions to start or deepen a relationship with a fan, season ticket holder or donor. By working together, we were able to accomplish things that individually would have been impossible to attain. With the infrastructure now in place, institutions across the country have the capability to engage their fans in the same manner. This technology is one of many that we all can use to identify “The Elusive Fan” and bring them into our ranks of ticket holders, while providing them with a personal interactive experience.

Thanks for this article to Steve Hank, associate athletics director for revenue generation at Arizona State University.