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he immense popularity of sports, as shown by the number of loyal fans around the world and the sale of related paraphernalia, demonstrates the power that branding has to tap into the emotions and psyche of people. According to Plunkett Research Ltd.—a leading provider of industry sector research, analysis, trends and statistics—a reasonable estimate of the total U.S. sports market might be \$375 billion to \$425 billion yearly. Advertisers are smart to become interested in a group like this. As the rent-to-own industry matures and companies strive to improve customer satisfaction and profitability amidst increasing competition, more organizations are teaming with sports giants in a new wave of image branding. The rent-to-own industry has several opportunities within this arena: increase name recognition, improve its image and attract potential customers.



BY RICHARD MAY

**W**ith the recent sporting event sponsorships and national advertising tie-ins with famous sports figures, Aaron's Sales and Lease Ownership and Rent-A-Center are attempting to do just this—and are introducing millions of Americans to rent-to-own companies in a manner never before seen.

Will Aaron's affiliation with the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and arena football translate into a new and loyal customer base of its own? Will Dallas Cowboy fans become Rent-A-Center fans? Will their national sports presence raise awareness and improve the image of the rent-to-own industry? Only the market and the future results will truly tell, but preliminary results indicate that it is worth every penny to try.

Sports marketing expert Matt Belew of advertising agency giant GSD&M works with groups such as the National Football League, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Professional Golfers Association and says that sports marketing is purely an exercise in company branding. Branding is a long-term campaign designed to permanently brand or leave an image in consumers' minds about a product or a company. Branding is not a short-term advertising campaign to generate immediate traffic. It is a long-term commitment to the future growth of your company.

To date, the current leader in sports

Above: Members of the Dallas Cowboys at the Oak Cliff Boys @ Girls Club on behalf of Rent-A-Center. Right: NASCAR star Michael Waltrip with Aaron's car commemorating the University of Texas Longhorns' national championship.



branding for rent-to-own, in terms of number of sponsorships and investment, is Aaron's Sales and Lease Ownership. Aaron's has affiliated itself with NASCAR, arena football, the Atlanta Falcons, bass fishing and many oth-



ers. With each sport, Aaron's positions itself using different branding and advertising strategies to maximize the company's presence and affiliation with the sport.

"Our branding strategies have shown significant growth for our company and our sports branding has been a big part of that growth," says Ken Butler, chief executive officer. "Frankly, we're trying to get a toehold in every community with one of our sports affiliations."

Aaron's uses a form of "sponsorship integration" that markets its product in a non-traditional manner. This strategy has been effective for many advertisers. For example, when Gatorade approached the NFL years ago,

the company offered exclusive access to coolers, cups and towels for every team and every game. Now, every time a viewer sees a running back who just scored a touchdown, saying "hi" to Mom, that viewer sees him tipping his Gatorade cup to the camera and millions of viewers. What kind of exposure do you think Gatorade gets when the coach is shown on highlight reels across the nation being doused with a cooler of Gatorade? Gatorade did not pay for that television time. The cost to Gatorade was only the expense for the products, but the return on that investment is the memory that will remain in people's minds for decades.

Aaron's is achieving similar exposure through its NASCAR race sponsorship. "When people watch professional car racing, millions of people watch the Aaron's dream machine race around a track for hours," says Butler. "No other sport really does that. It's an ongoing branding commercial with a very loyal fan base. And we think the same loyalty will be transferred to Aaron's."

Butler believes that his company's sports branding has introduced Aaron's to a new group of customers based



Arena Football League's Atlanta Force, with Aaron's name on display on the sidelines. Below: Cincinnati Bengals' star Rudi Johnson, in one of his many poses for Rent2Own's advertising and in-store displays.



slap your name on a team and hope something happens," he says. "You've got to have some fun with it and really get involved and get your employees involved."

For example, when Aaron's first had the opportunity to sponsor NAS-

Busch racing series. Waltrip's eventual than expected. The campaign featured Darrell Waltrip and his brother, Michael, in a series of commercials highlighting some brotherly competition and the question of if, or when, Darrell would return to the NASCAR

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on the "halo effect." In marketing, the halo effect refers to the perceived positive features of a particular item extending to a broader brand. In other words, think of how the iPod has had a positive effect on perceptions of Apple's other products.

Butler emphasizes that you have to be involved in your sports marketing to maximize the results. "You can't just

CAR star Michael Waltrip's car, Butler thought the car's number could provide another marketing opportunity. So, they picked number 99—to coincide with the company's \$99 monthly big-screen specials Aaron's was promoting at the time.

Aaron's participation in the NASCAR advertising campaign featuring the Waltrip brothers paid off more

decision to return to the Busch series after a 14-year hiatus spawned a frenzy of discussions with race enthusiasts and sports commentators for months. Aaron's reaped the unexpected benefit from the increased exposure.

Aaron's sponsorship of the Arena Football League—and its name placement on the Georgia Force team uniforms—helped introduce Aaron's to

yet another audience. Additional creativity helped the company's branding, name recognition and image even more. The company helped create the Aaron's cheerleading dream team and the Aaron's Lucky Dog mascot, both of which are featured throughout the AFL's Arena Bowl championship game

angler, as are the companies that sponsor her. Already, she has generated more sponsorships than many male counterparts and Aaron's is one of those key sponsors.

"It was a symbiotic deal with Aaron's," says Parker. "Aaron's gets introduced to my industry's audience and

ful branding of "Tiger" John Cleek's rent-to-own company with the local University of Missouri Tigers football team. Every week during the Tigers' football season, Cleek spends hours working with local media and writing predictions for the local team. He then displays these predictions in his store-

ple and smooth and the costs to a minimum. Karla Welbourne, Johnson's publicist, is currently looking at other APRO member companies throughout the nation to create a similar relationship in other areas.

Chappy's Rent To Own in Anderson, Indiana, also has been successful in its local sports sponsorship. Chappy's has been sponsoring the front-wheel drive division at the local Anderson speedway and racetrack for the past four years. Owner Kenny Chapman is not only a racing fan but also is becoming a local fixture at the racetrack. The announcer likes to broadcast Chapman's presence in the stands for the fans to cheer. Chappy's has its logo on all cars in the division races.

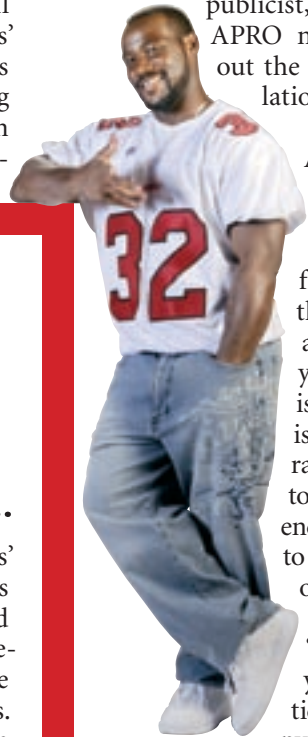
The company also sponsors "Chappy's Night Out" every year and employees hand out tickets to their customers. Chappy's sets up a tent on the track with some of its merchandise for all to see. Chappy's received national industry distinction because of its sponsorships being so prevalent on racing Web sites and in electronic newsletters. Go to any Internet search site for rent-to-own and Chappy's will likely show up prominently throughout the year.

Chapman has fun with the sponsorship and it has paid off. Many of Chappy's customers come from seeing the Chappy's name at the racetracks. Some customers are drivers in the local competition. Chapman, himself, has even raced on one occasion. Chappy's is featured frequently in the local papers and on radio and Chapman is a guest on the local radio race show periodically. Chappy's sponsorship is a perfect example of how to be creative in a sports integration campaign that combines name placement and customer involvement.

Rent-A-Center combines sports marketing and community involvement in its work with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. The company sponsors sports-themed rooms, donating televisions, DVD players, furniture and computers, to 33 Boys & Girls Club locations in 11 markets across the nation. The rooms

also are furnished with local sports memorabilia reflecting the town's professional teams such as the Dallas Cowboys, Los Angeles Dodgers, Chicago Bulls and San Antonio Spurs.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of America are safe places for children to learn, relax, play games and/or exercise until their parents get off from work. The combination of community involvement and association with the local professional sports team helps Rent-A-Center establish brand recognition within the community. Additionally, the Rent-A-Center rooms, while a charitable donation, also introduce



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and seen by millions of viewers.

Aaron's recently entered new territory with its sponsorship of professional bass angler Janet Parker. Parker is one of the pioneers of the bass fishing sport that has been dominated by men for decades. Aaron's seized the opportunity once again to be a pioneer in new sports arenas such as women's professional bass fishing. She is one of the first women to be a part of the recently created Bassmaster Women's tour. Parker, who is currently number 36 out of 122 on the national tour, is making a splash as a female pro-bass

to the 80,000 miles a year I drive as a traveling billboard for them.”

Parker is referring to her Aaron's-wrapped bass boat that broadcasts Aaron's sponsorship at the many media opportunities professional bass fishing attracts. The traveling Aaron's "billboard" is another example of how Aaron's sponsorship integration propels the Aaron's name in non-traditional methods.

The power of professional sports marketing is a multi-billion-dollar business that attracts worldwide attention, but the same dynamics and the same success easily can be achieved locally. Many smaller rent-to-own dealers have been just as successful sponsoring local college teams, semi-professional leagues or by using national sports figures locally.

"Many towns do not have a professional sports team, so their loyalty is on the local team or favorite sport," says GSD&M's Belew. "Local sports affiliations can be the most successful in terms of comparing costs versus return. Many local sports sponsorship opportunities are not expensive at all and are hugely popular and successful for the local sponsor."

Many APRO members are familiar with the success-

front, a visible sign of the business' community pride. His predictions have become famous and his brand entrenched in the community—a result of local branding that spans three generations over the past four decades.

RTO dealer Mike Tissot scored a touchdown with the successful affiliation between his Ohio-based Rent-2-Own store and Cincinnati Bengals running back Rudi Johnson. When Johnson first became a running back for the Bengals, Tissot helped furnish his home. In return, Johnson lends himself and his likeness to Rent-2-Own's marketing.

Johnson has a presence in every Rent-2-Own store. A six-foot cutout of Johnson features "Rudi's Specials." Alternatively, you can see Johnson featured on RTO TV, broadcast throughout the store. Johnson also is on the radio for Rent-2-Own and there are plans to feature him in the company's upcoming holiday specials.

"Not only did our relationship with Rudi help our image with customers, it was an internal boost, as well," says Tissot. "Employees feel real good talking about their company when it has an association with a professional athlete."

David Moore, Rent-2-Own's advertising manager, attributes the campaign's success to the relationship between Tissot, Johnson and Johnson's publicist. They did not involve any agents, NFL or Bengals logos or trademarks. This kept the relationship sim-



Rent-A-Center to working parents.

"Sports marketing and sponsorships are some of the most popular ways for companies to promote their brand," says Mary Gazioglu, Rent-A-Center spokesperson. "Sports teams appeal to a variety of people and can often result in new customers."

From the national chains to the local racetrack, rent-to-own stores are establishing identities, improving their image and creating customer loyalty through successful sports branding partnerships. By current measurements, this looks like a partnership for the future of the rent-to-own industry. Follow these guidelines for a successful sports sponsorship: Do not expect overnight results or immediate sales. They can occur, but sports sponsorships are branding campaigns designed for the

long-term commitment and execution. Get involved with your sponsorship to maximize the marketing and advertising opportunities your sponsorship provides. Be creative—sports sponsorships can involve games, events, personalities and media-hype. There are many dimensions beyond a sign on the field or a name on a jersey. Finally, do as Kenny Chapman says regarding his sports sponsorship: "We enjoy it. We have fun with it and it's really been good to us." ■

Richard May is APRO's public affairs director.