

10 Marketing Issues for Major League Baseball

Written by Maury Brown
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Derek Jeter is the highest profile MLB player seen regularly in television ads. Why baseball personalities aren't used more often as pitchmen isn't all MLB's fault.

Leave the television on long enough, and at some point, you'll see a star athlete plugging products. Whether it's Dwayne Wade, Tiger Woods, the Williams sisters, Danica Patrick, or Brett Favre, you'll bump into them on the dial.

But, short of Derek Jeter and Lou Piniella, Major League Baseball personalities have pretty much slipped off the national marketing radar, something that the league has been roundly criticized for.

The problems, however, are not all MLB's fault. Here's 10 marketing issues for the league:

Now You See Me, Now You Don't – One of baseball's biggest problems isn't about efforts by the league or the MLBPA to market its players, but rather how the players move on and off camera. Consider: with the exception of pitchers, players are shown during their at bats (3-6 times a game), on the base paths, or when a ball is hit to them on defense. There is no

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sustained face time. Whereas in the NBA, a player may be on the court for most, if not all of an entire game, baseball's stars are only seen in a limited fashion. Baseball's dynamic makes showing star players on camera continually nearly impossible.

Lack of College Baseball Coverage – One of the biggest reasons the NFL and NBA does well in marketing their players has to do with young talent being covered on television while being part of NCAA Football or Basketball. For example, [ESPN alone will show 300 college football games across their various platforms during the 2009 football season](#)

. Given that the transition from college to the pros for NFL and NBA players is a far shorter trek than most college baseball players that often times find themselves in development systems before ever making it to the majors, fans have been following many college football and basketball players for years before they enter the NFL or NBA. When you throw in that college baseball has only the College World Series as its national television platform, it's difficult for MLB to market its young stars on the level that the NFL and NBA do

Wall St. Ad Execs Yet to Tap Minority Stars – Baseball can rightfully say that it has the most player diversity starting in games than any other US pro sports league. Some of MLB's biggest stars are Latinos or from the Far East. The problem is television ad execs have yet to see the full potential of such players. A good example is Albert Pujols, someone that should translate well to the camera, but has not been used as a pitchman. Others include Ichiro Suzuki and David Ortiz. In terms of Far East athletes, maybe ad execs figure Yao Ming is enough. As for the Latin players, it seems a vast demographic isn't being fully tapped.

Waiting for the "Jordan" of Baseball – The NBA had Michael Jordan. Golf has Tiger Woods. Baseball has... While Derek Jeter has embodied the good looks and appeal that will reach a broad demographic that ad execs can latch onto, he is not the player that Jordan and Woods are – an athlete considered worthy of "the greatest" and one that has massive appeal across multiple age demographics. Barry Bonds could have been that player, but PED allegations and an abrasive personality made him a near cancer for advertisers. Somewhere, sometime, a great player will come around that resonates on the Jordan level. Unfortunately, Jackie Robinson isn't around any longer.

"Tradition" vs "Flash" – From a younger demo perspective, baseball has lost its luster, in large part due to the ascension of Michael Jordan. Baseball is touted as having a "long and prestigious tradition" which doesn't exactly compete well with the high-energy tempo of the NBA, NFL, and NHL. As one scribe wrote, baseball is a game of calm, punctuated by extreme action. That sounds great... if you're older. In an era where kids are looking for ultra-stimulus,

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baseball's pace is lost in translation. When 18-34s have the lion's share of discretionary income, baseball isn't the first stop for some corporations with a young demo appeal when looking to advertise.

Waiting For Barkley – In terms of studio shows surrounding games, baseball lags woefully behind most of its Big-4 counterparts. There is no “Howie” or “Terry”, or “Barkley”. FOX has dropped their pre-game show, which leaves TBS. And while Cal Ripken and Dennis Eckersley have made a go of it, they haven't been able to exude the personality that other pre and post-game shows have had to offer. The solution, or at least an attempt at it? TBS has brought in David Wells.

Just Let Me Know When It Begins and Ends – Baseball finally got with the picture and realized that by putting World Series games on late Eastern Time, they were potentially losing a generation of baseball fans as kids hit the sack long before games would end. But, baseball's a game that ends when it ends, as opposed to being controlled by the clock, that makes it difficult for fringe fans to get into when there are competing interests in hundreds of channels to switch to, and video games to play. Another issue that baseball faces – and only NASCAR seems to butt up against – has to do with delay of game due to weather. When a game starts, nothing kills your captive fan base off like a rain delay. Worse are games that are scheduled and postponed due to rain or snow. With families becoming intensely schedule driven, they want to know when the game is on, and when it ends.

MLB's Image Problem – There's the obvious (PED culture) and, the not so obvious (chewing tobacco) when it comes to baseball's image. Would Manny Ramirez be more marketable if he hadn't been suspended for PEDs? There's a case to be made there. And, while it's legal, few, if any, find a close up of a player with a mouthful of chaw spitting a stream of black tobacco drool appealing. Think Gillette would keep a player like Jeter in their ad campaigns if he chewed?

Baseball is For Old People – Baseball has moved further and further away from being a sports watched by 18-34 year-olds, while continuing its popularity with those over 35. Since the '60s, with the ascension of the NFL, and the NBA's popularity growth out the '80s, younger fans have found basketball and football to be more appealing. But, it may also be due to the extended career life of MLB players that has some seeing baseball as a game for “old people.” Currently, the average age for an MLB player is 27.9, while it was 26.68 for the NFL and 26.81 for the NBA with 10 MLB clubs having at least one player 40 or older.

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The Declining Interest By African-Americans in Baseball – Whether it has been the rise in the NBA’s popularity due to the Jordan factor; the continued diversity growth in international players; the fact that on average, players can jump to the professional ranks faster in the NBA and NFL, or other factors, there has been a steady decline in the number of African-Americans playing baseball. MLB, late in proactively dealing with this issue, has been pushing the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) program, and working to highlight players such as Curtis Granderson in the latest *This is Beyond Baseball* ad campaign. But, the damage has been done, and now baseball is digging out from the hole.

Whether the game is as appealing to African-Americans, or for that matter, a large section of the American public, as it used to be is one of the challenges that MLB faces from a marketing perspective. How they go about rectifying the issues will be one of balancing gains in marketability against the hallmarks of the game that have existed for more than 100 years. As they say, the times they are a changing. Baseball can’t shift with every whim, but needs to keep up in this ultra-fast-paced world that fans are in. Blink, and you could lose more of your audience.



Maury Brown is the Founder and President of the [Business of Sports Network](#), which includes The Biz of Baseball, The Biz of Football, The Biz of Basketball and The Biz of Hockey. He is contributor to Baseball Prospectus, and is available as a freelance writer

[Brown's full bio is here.](#)

He looks forward to your comments via email and can be [contacted through the Business of Sports Network \(select his name in the dropdown provided\)](#)

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