

Running The Bases

In the far Western suburbs of Chicago in the town of Geneva there is a minor league baseball team called the Kane County Cougars.

Since they were formed 15 years ago, they have built a large, loyal fan base by focusing on the fundamentals.

For the past several years the Cougars' season attendance has surpassed 500,000 fans. For a Class A (basically entry level professional league) team this is remarkable. Yes, there is plenty of direct competition. The Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox draw fans from the same area. Recently two other minor league teams have started in brand new stadiums within the Cougars' larger trade area as well.

The Cougars players are provided by their major league affiliate Oakland Athletics, and most are new each year. Sometimes their play is erratic. This past year they failed to even make the playoffs. But the fans still came.

This issue of *The Stokely Letter* will share some the Cougars' "secrets" in building a strong brand and business. Many of these principles may be applicable to your own business.

1. Clearly Define Your Business and Your Customer

The Cougars understand their business and their primary Customer.....Entertainment for Families, particularly those with small children.

Everything the Cougars and their staff do is targeted at making the family entertainment experience as positive as possible.

2. Make It Attractive to Buy and Easy to Find Your Product or Service

This starts with offering family friendly admission prices, which range from the \$6 lawn area to \$9 box seats.

Free parking is right by the stadium. This also speeds up the parking process, since there is no need to stop at a booth to pay for parking. A trolley circles the parking lot to pick up Customers who don't want to walk, and delivers them right to the gate.

The Cougars advertise aggressively in Chicago area newspapers and through billboards. Free Cougar season schedules may be found at many area retailers during the season. All advertising features their phone number and website address so it is easy to buy tickets.

3. Treat Your Customers the Way They Want to Be Treated

Every Cougars employee from the ticket takers to the concession staff to the security personnel appear to be motivated by Customer satisfaction. "Enjoy the game" is a Cougars mantra you will hear even from the parking lot attendants as you arrive. After the game the ticket staff stands at the gates thanking you for coming, and frequently passes out sponsor product coupons or free samples.

I have never observed unruly fans at a Cougars game, despite plenty of beer sales. The family fun atmosphere is so pervasive there that it would just seem out of place. Of course the casually dressed security staff is always visible.

4. Keep It Fun and Involve Your Customer

Some fans may think baseball is incidental to a Cougars game. After every half inning there is an on-field stunt designed to involve and entertain the fans. These include a pedal cart race around the bases for grade school aged kids; Cougars staff using slingshots to power water balloons and water soaked sponge balls into the stands at lucky fans; the "human bowling ball" in which a teenager climbs inside a large wire framed ball and rolls down a ramp to knock over large bowling pins (always successfully); and my personal favorite the "Ozzie Race". Cougars costumed mascot Ozzie races a three year old from first base to home. Some pratfall always happens to Ozzie on the bases, as the child races home to victory and the crowd cheers.

A real treat for all the kids is the chance to go onto the field before the game and mingle with the Cougars players, who will gladly sign their autograph on your baseball, book or Tee shirt. It also encourages fans to get to the game early.

The outfield bleacher areas have been reconstructed into party decks that may be rented by groups for special entertaining. One of them even has a hot tub.

5. Offer Occasional Specials to Keep it Fresh

Special entertainment is brought in periodically to supplement the regular half inning stunts. Jake the Diamond Dog is a beautiful retriever who uses his jaws to pick up baseball bats, bring the umpire a basket of fresh baseballs or bottled water, and plays catch the Frisbee with his trainer or lucky fans in the stands.

But the real special is a spectacular fireworks display after many of the games. Just like the 4th of July. And it is even accompanied by themed music over the public address system.

6. Effectively Communicate with Your Customer

The Cougars website kccougars.com is loaded with information about the current game, players, special events, statistics, standings and more. You can listen to the game day radio broadcasts over the internet with a link found there.

You can sign up for a periodic email Cougars newsletter which provides even more team details and special events.

One of the post game fireworks shows I attended this past year appeared to be somewhat shorter than usual, although enjoyable. I received a letter the following week from the Cougars' general manager apologizing for a malfunction in the fireworks computerized firing device. He stated this show was not up to Cougars standards, and they wanted to make it right for their fans. Enclosed was a certificate for two free box seats for a future game!

7. Make It Easy For Your Customer to Buy More

The tickets are reasonably priced, the parking is free, so it is easy to rationalize buying lots of high profit margin concession food and Cougars souvenirs.

There is an extensive menu of food and beverages available. There are even three different kinds of ice cream treats. Outside grills prepare freshly cooked brats, hamburgers, hotdogs and my favorite the pork chop sandwich.

8. Continuously Listen To Your Customer and Respond

This is the real reason the Cougars are so successful. They are out with their Customers at every game observing, listening and changing.

After one game many years back a few kids approached one of the Cougars staff and asked if they could run around the bases just for fun.

Well, the Cougars staff person could have said no. He could have said it is not our policy. He could have thought about liability issues if someone was injured. He could have just thought it was too much trouble.

But he said..... why not? Go ahead.

And thus began an incredible Cougars tradition. When other kids saw these kids on the bases they wanted to do it too. It has become so popular that there is now a special protocol for "Running The Bases" after a Cougars game. The event is even accompanied by some great, driving classic rock songs played over the PA system.

Last year a staff member estimated a total of 3,000 people had lined up to run the bases after a game. And not just kids. There

were all ages, shapes and sizes. We watched a father helping his severely handicapped son around the bases step by step. The look on the boy's face was priceless. They have even had nuns on the base path.

And the best part is it doesn't cost the Cougars anything to do this! Some fans probably come to the game just to "Run the Bases". Where else can you do it?

Another benefit is that it keeps fans at the park so that departing traffic is spread out more evenly and flows more smoothly. So Cougars fans drive home with smiles on their faces.

Summary

The Kane County Cougars are an unusual success in a highly competitive business.

We believe some of the "secrets" for their performance are:

1. Clearly Define your Business *and* your Customer
2. Make it Attractive to Buy *and* Easy to Find Your Product or Service
3. Treat Your Customers the Way They Want to be Treated
4. Keep it Fun *and* Involve Your Customer
5. Offer Occasional Specials to Keep it Fresh
6. Effectively Communicate with Your Customer
7. Make it Easy for Your Customer to Buy More
8. Continuously Listen to Your Customer *and* Respond

We look forward to the opportunity to discuss with you how these concepts may be applied to your own business to accelerate the growth of your sales and profits.

"Managing is getting paid for home runs someone else hits."

Casey Stengal

"A fellow doesn't last long on what he has done. He's got to keep on delivering as he goes along."

Carl Hubbell

"You can't win all the time. There are guys out there who are better than you are."

Yogi Berra

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