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ESPN gains momentum by turning skeptics into fans

Craig McGuire - 3 Oct 2005 00:00

When ESPN launched in 1979, many thought an all-sports network would fail. But by being its own biggest cheerleader - touting its innovations- the network has converted the doubters.

From San Francisco to Southeast Asia, ESPN is "The Worldwide Leader in Sports," featuring a broad portfolio of multimedia entertainment assets that includes more than 50 properties.

ESPN reaches into 88 million households across the globe each day. The network presents more than 5,100 live or original hours of sports programming annually and features more than 65 sports.

So how lucrative is ESPN? On August 10 this year, a report discussing earnings for ESPN parent Walt Disney stated: "The entertainment giant's profits rose 41% [year over year], driven by ESPN."

International multimedia giant. Innovator of cable television technology. Programming trailblazer. Corporate cash cow. Today the Bristol, CT-based cable channel is all of these, like a well-conditioned athlete in his prime, swinging for the fences and showing little sign of slowing down.

But this was not always so.

What is now one of the most lucrative franchises in television history was once an overly ambitious upstart in the eyes of many skeptics.

Echoing the early naysayers, ESPN's 25th anniversary media guide repeats the doubts that dogged the network in its early years: "Who would watch sports 24 hours per day? How would you fill a half-hour of sports news? Could this network survive?"

And along the way, like Tiger Woods' dutiful caddy, the PR pros were there to help the network blaze its path to glory.

Convincing the media

For a fledgling network that desperately needed to build buzz among sports scribes, media relations played a crucial role in those early days.

Originally know as the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (shortened in 1985), ESPN was founded by Scott Rasmussen and his father, Bill Rasmussen, on September 7, 1979, as an alternative to short sports segments in standard television news broadcasts.

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Rosa Gatti was drafted 10 months into that first season to head communications.

"Do you want to know why I am still here after 25 years?" asks Gatti, now SVP of corporate communications and outreach. "I know it sounds dreadfully cliché, especially coming from a sports network, but it really is such a team-oriented environment."

For instance, consider the "50 States in 50 Days" tour, a segment on SportsCenter where a production crew stops in a new state every day for 50 days to showcase what each state brings to the national sports scene.

To execute the communications objectives, every communications professional at ESPN, regardless of what they were working on, had to sign on to manage PR for a particular state or group of states, says Mike Soltys, VP of domestic network communications.

"It turned out to be an incredible team-building exercise, where everyone was contributing to a larger company initiative, working with people they would not work with ordinarily," says Soltys, who joined the network in 1980 as ESPN's first intern.

But back in those early years, Gatti did not have the luxury of a large staff, international operations, or the deep pockets that came with success.

"There was so much skepticism," recalls Gatti. "It was a big question mark if we would even survive. I was traveling almost every weekend to papers across the US, pitching to sports editors the benefits of a 24-hour sports network."

In those early days of cable, the cheerleading was as much about promoting the content as it was about how that content was being shown.

"I think the early breakthrough came when we televised the America's Cup in 1987," Gatti reflects.

In 1983, the US had lost the America's Cup for the first time in the event's history, so in 1987, it had to go to Australia to reclaim it.

"We were issuing press release after press release about our plans, but the media were very skeptical, some saying it would be like watching paint dry," Gatti says. "But once the pictures came on screen, with the boat equipped with lipstick cameras and other devices, and you could actually peer in the faces of the crew in the middle of the night, halfway around the world, it became a phenomenon."

Covering an event on a golf course or a football field was tough enough, but this was at sea. "People in the industry sat up and took notice," Gatti says. "It drew the attention of the NFL, [which] said they were impressed with what a cable network could accomplish. This eventually led to negotiating a deal, which was another turning point."

ESPN's ability to change the way people watch sports, and the way in which it promoted these advances, quickly fueled ESPN's meteoric rise to the pinnacle of the sports world. For instance, ESPN was first to introduce the "electronic cut-in" so that it could cover multiple games of the NCAA Tournament in 1980. It was the first to televise a game in stereo (a 1980 football game), add a continuous score box (a 1994 soccer game), and put a referee on microphone (a 1998 hockey game).

In between were dozens of advancements that the communications team used to pump out releases and scour the sports sections to drum up interest.

Juggling priorities

ESPN's communications department includes 28 PR pros, five administrative assistants, four corporate outreach workers, and seven who manage network information, including listings, viewer response, and photography.

"We are unique in that no other television company has such a volume and variation in programming," Gatti says. "Programming is scheduled, but, for instance, you don't know teams in playoffs, when there will be rainouts, who the alternate seeds will be."

With networks and radio stations, original programming, ESPN-branded events, magazines, and internal operations, communications is obviously a challenging operation.

"That is why we actually have our priorities printed out on little cards," Gatti explains. "Our senior management team comes together for two days, looks at last year's priorities, this year's priorities, debates and discusses, and sets the agenda, which we then mirror in communications. Right now, these include the recent integration of ABC Sports and ESPN, campaigns for the NFL and Monday Night Football, promoting ESPN.com, and others."

But with so many priorities, how responsive is the team at ESPN?

"It was a particularly slow news cycle around Christmas last year, and I was in desperate need of a story, so I went fishing at ESPN," says Seth Arenstein, editorial director, *CableFAX Daily*. "With- in a short time, they got me 30 minutes on the phone with a top programming

executive, while he was in the stores Christmas shopping with his family."

Considering the enormous amount of live television ESPN produces, it is a wonder that more snafus don't arise. Like the time Rush Limbaugh resigned from ESPN to escape the furor caused by comments he made during "NFL Sunday Countdown" on ESPN. The radio talk show host said he thought "Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb is overrated because the media wanted to see a black quarterback succeed."

"It's live TV, so these types of things are going to happen," Gatti says. "Our challenges are to anticipate issues, or at least prepare to be nimble and react quickly. From our producers to our PR professionals, everyone knows how to react. But we have to always have some PR people on duty, available by phone, beeper, on-call night and weekends, because it can happen at any moment."

Unlike most networks where turnover can be relatively high, at ESPN, many employees have been there up to 20 years. "It's not only a great place to work - the ESPN brand is widely known and respected," Soltys says. "But you also get to work on some amazing material, and we've just had so many great stories to tell over the years."

Mike Hiestand, a *USA Today* columnist, has his own theory as to why ESPN communications pros stay so long.

"Have you ever been to Bristol?" Hiestand asks. "It's like a frozen small-town USA scene ripped right out of Norman Rockwell. If you live in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, you want to move around every once in a while. But when you live in Bristol, you kind of get attached to the area."

PR contacts

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