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WNBA looks to spark interest — in league and apparel

When NBA Commissioner Adam Silver admitted that, 20 years after its creation, the WNBA is not where it was expected to be by now, he drew attention to the issues faced by women's sports marketers in their efforts to move on from the dated "shrink it and pink it" mindset.

Marketers are trying to build connections that go beyond female sports fans rooting for their favorite team, to promote women's fitness as a lifestyle and capitalize on the lucrative intersection of fitness and fashion.

Two decades after the league debuted in 1997, interest in the WNBA reportedly remains tepid at best. "We thought ratings and attendance would be higher," Silver said in an interview during the Sports Business Journal's Game Changers conference last year.

He primarily blames the media and potential business partners in part for snubbing the professional women's basketball league. However, much has been written about the problems keeping the WNBA from attracting and engaging fans — players' lack of personal brands, fans' failure to follow top college basketball players into the professional leagues and the fact that male fans don't seem to be interested in women's basketball. According to Silver, female fans don't seem very interested, either, for that matter.

The WNBA's disappointing progress highlights the need for more sophisticated, targeted marketing strategies. Marketing to female sports and fitness fans is evolving beyond the old-school "shrink it and pink it" strategy of appealing to women by offering team jerseys in feminine sizes and colors.

While 20-something men remain the most coveted sports fan demographic, numerous studies have shown that women make up to 80 percent of the household purchasing decisions. Sports marketers are responding accordingly with brand campaigns tailored to women, from sports drinks to "athleisure" wear.

To his credit, Silver readily

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



**DOUGLAS N. MASTERS
AND SETH A. ROSE**

Douglas N. Masters is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is deputy chairman of the firm's advanced media and technology department and co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group. He can be reached at dmasters@loeb.com. Seth A. Rose is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. He can be reached at srose@loeb.com.

acknowledges the WNBA should be doing a better job of marketing itself to fans. To heighten interest, the league is stepping up its game on a number of fronts. Starting with the hiring of a new president in February — the troubled league's fourth in 20 years — the WNBA is launching a full-court press to increase viewership.

Among accomplishments that include serving as vice president of global community affairs at the Coca-Cola Co., Lisa Borders helped bring the Atlanta Dream to the city in 2008 during her time as president of the Atlanta City Council.

The WNBA is trying to gain further exposure through a variety of other efforts.

It recently launched a new marketing campaign called Watch Me to showcase players including Brittney Griner, Candace Parker, Elena Delle Donne and Maya Moore and their personal stories.

The league's New York Liberty is also partnering with The Players Tribune media company to produce a documentary series about the team. Last year, the WNBA created a marketing campaign aimed at LGBT fans, including public events at lesbian clubs and pride parades, but it's had mixed results so far.

Borders has also said that the WNBA plans to use the Rio Olympics as a marketing platform this summer, pointing out that every member of the U.S. Olympic women's basketball team plays for the professional league.

Outside of the world of professional basketball, big name brands in the sports world are increasingly seeking to connect with female consumers by trying to inspire and motivate them in their personal athletic endeavors.

For instance, sports energy drink giant Gatorade created a series of ads and YouTube videos last year for its Win from Within campaign featuring athletes from tennis champion Serena Williams to softball player Jaide Bucher. Bucher was born with one hand.

The makers of athletic wear for women are increasingly holding up female athletes as empowering inspirations in a number of marketing campaigns. In spring 2015, Nike, the largest retailer of women's athletic wear, launched its #betterforit initiative to help women become more active, set goals and challenge themselves physically.

Nike is promoting insights from top athletes like sprinter Allyson Felix while encouraging women to document and share their own experiences as they work towards their fitness goals.

Earlier this year, Nike also produced an eight-episode original series, "Margot vs. Lily — A Better for It Production," about two sisters who develop competing workout videos. The company released the series in conjunction with NikeWomen Week activities taking place around the world.

Nike's women-focused marketing efforts address women's changing attitudes about sports

and fitness. "These platforms are designed to motivate and challenge the swelling wave of women around the world who are adopting sport and fitness as a lifestyle, rather than a trend," Nike said in a statement about the series.

Similarly, Under Armour's marketing campaign, I Will What I Want, takes on the issue of body image and features ballet dancer Misty Copeland. The sports apparel company is undoubtedly hoping women can relate to the stereotype-defying Copeland, who was told early in her career that she didn't have the right type of body to be a ballerina. Copeland has said the criticism only made her work harder.

Today, athletic wear retailers like Athleta and Adidas are vying for a share of female consumer spending on the lucrative intersection of fitness and fashion. Women's clothing companies are branching out into sportswear, too. H&M launched H&M Sport with design advice from Sweden's Olympic team, while Uniqlo, a Japanese casual wear designer, has introduced its own performance wear line.

The WNBA is another player hoping to appeal to women's new outlook on fitness and sports as a lifestyle by marrying fashion flair with function. In a synergistic move, the WNBA is collaborating with Nike on a new basketball performance apparel line for women, which was designed with input from WNBA stars and the University of Connecticut women's basketball team. The four-piece collection of hoodies, pants, shorts and tanks emphasizes both freedom of movement and a flattering fit.

It remains to be seen whether the WNBA's women-centric marketing efforts will translate into more female fans for the struggling league. Yet new efforts to engage women may result in positive benefits across the board in a larger sense.

With athletic and women's wear brands sending a consistent message about fitness as an attitude and overall lifestyle, it's likely that more women will embrace sports as participants as well as spectators.