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## MLB using technology to expand its reach

Spring training is underway in Florida and Arizona, and Major League Baseball has a new commissioner, new executive leadership and a persistent challenge.

MLB has the oldest and least diverse fan base of any of the four major professional sports leagues. The average baseball fan is over 55, white and male. That's bad news in today's sports marketing world, where the most desirable advertising demographic is the 18-to-34 bracket.

MLB doesn't seem to be gaining any younger fans, either — the average median age of viewers for televised games reportedly increases year by year as existing fans age.

What's causing this problem? Technology.

When MLB's current fans were younger, the athletic achievement of players gave them a celebrity status that kept fans and advertisers engaged in the game. In today's technology-driven world, baseball has to compete with exponentially more digital distractions and attracting younger fans requires engagement on multiple platforms and screens in order to stay ahead of other sports in the advertising game.

So if the problem is technology, what's the solution?

Technology. And luckily for the league, MLB has that — and the new league leadership is working to make the most of it.

In fact, MLB has been trying to attract younger fans by using technology for a number of years. The MLB Fan Cave, the three-story, 15,000-square-foot multimedia production hub in New York City, was MLB's most high-profile attempt to court the 18-to-34 demographic.

From its opening in 2011, the Fan Cave was home to a rotating group of fans who watched every MLB game throughout the season on TV screens that covered the walls.

The concept began with two

fans "living and breathing baseball" in the Fan Cave while the sports world watched. It later developed a game with an expanded case of Cave Dwellers competing, reality-show style, to stay in the facility and to win cash and prizes.

The Fan Cave also served as a highly visible venue for the league. In the more than three years it was open, the Cave hosted concerts and art exhibitions and produced comic (and sometimes quirky) player-focused video content tailored for social media sharing.

During the 2014 season, it also added "Off the Bat," a weekly 30-minute show that aired on MTV2. It featured player profiles, video clips, interviews and guest appearances by acting and music celebrities, including rap artist 50 Cent (who talked about returning to Citi Field to perform after his infamous, not-even-close-to-the-plate first pitch) and "Mad Men" star Jon Hamm (who talked about his baseball movie, "Million Dollar Arm").

Andrew McCutchen, who had an executive producer credit on the show, jumped at the chance to participate, saying it would be "a lot of fun to show a different side of baseball and the players." And MTV President Stephen Friedman described the program as blurring the lines between lifestyle, sports and entertainment. Commentators noted its distinct flavor, calling it "closer to MTV Cribs than SportsCenter."

These efforts to connect baseball to other forms of entertainment was an attempt to make the sport feel more relevant to the younger audience. And while fans and commentators gave the Fan Cave mixed reviews over the course of its four seasons, it did succeed in accomplishing this difficult task and generated much-needed attention for the league.

As of January 2014, the Fan Cave had generated more than 10.5 billion social media impressions — reportedly worth an

### SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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estimated \$195 million in paid advertising — and had scored 2.5 million followers across social media platforms.

The league recognizes that the use of technology as a marketing tool must evolve in order to continue to generate results. In December, Bob Bowman, former president and CEO of MLB Advanced Media, was announced as the league's president for business and media. He announced last month that MLB was revamping its use of the Fan Cave, closing the social media hub and ending the reality show aspect in an effort to consolidate the league's social media efforts.

Tim Brosnan, the former MLB executive vice president of business who originated the Fan Cave concept, also left the league after new Commissioner Rob Manfred took over and restructured the league's executive team.

MLBAM and MLB Network will be handling all social media activities moving forward, under the guidance of Tony Petitti, the league's new chief operating officer, in an effort to help focus these efforts on the same goals and to create more consistent and effective messaging. MLB will retain other elements of the Fan Cave, including continuing to use it for creating content involving players outside the

ballpark and as a concert venue.

MLB is also ahead of the curve with other technology uses. The At Bat mobile app for tracking and streaming games has been the highest-grossing sports app in the Apple Store for the past six years. MLBAM regularly produces highlight videos from games and archival footage and posts that content on YouTube.

And, just last year, the league released a remake of the iconic 1986 eight-bit video game "R.B.I. Baseball" that can be played on a wide variety of consoles and mobile devices.

Manfred has already hinted that he plans to continue to use the league's biggest asset — MLBAM and its technology — to engage younger fans.

Reaching and engaging the younger, digitally focused demographic hasn't been easy for MLB. According to Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings, sports-related tweets usually dominate the conversation, but even with a matchup between Boston and St. Louis, the 2013 World Series didn't break the top 10 in Twitter engagement.

That said, as the pre-season games continue, the league seems to be on the right track with a recognition of technology as both the challenge and the solution.