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New Slates Are Blank; What Should We Write

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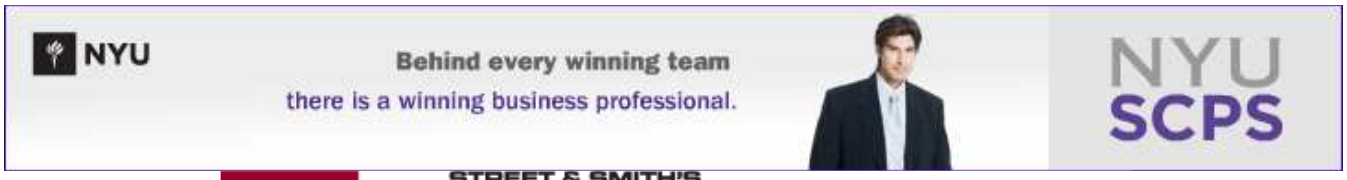

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New slates are blank; what should we write?

RICK BURTON

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This week I welcomed 125 freshmen to my Sports, Business and Society marketing class. As I stood in front of their inquisitive faces, in a room much like the one in the movie "The Paper Chase," the students all knew those business wizards at Major League Baseball had, exactly one month earlier, just barely averted their ninth work stoppage in 30 years.

It made me wonder what I should tell these bright-eyed kids about our industry during the next 10 weeks of the term.

Should I present the glass as half empty, given MLB's numerous 2002 debacles which included a hideously flawed plan to eliminate two teams, an All-Star Game snafu and reports of rampant steroid use? Should I get on my soapbox about ongoing Title IX inequities at countless NCAA schools? Lash out at reported declines in youth team sport participation? Bore them with stories of team revenue models that don't work for maybe as many as 50 percent of NHL and MLB clubs?

Or, should I tell them that according to SportsBusiness Journal, the sports industry generates nearly $200 billion annually and represents one of the cornerstones of the American economy? Should I explain that intuitive planning from the NFL secures that organization approximately $2.2 billion each year from four broadcast partners (regardless of ratings)? And, while I'm at it, shouldn't I explain that Alex Rodriguez gets $22 million a year to play shortstop because the market will bear it? That means jobs for his agents, lawyers, accountants, marketers, trainers, chefs and limo drivers.

If they ask me about getting a job in sports, should I tell them that education, internships, hard work and sales creativity are often rewarded with low-paying? Or should I announce that four years from now they'll find a sports world clamoring for Generation Y experts who know how to draw in non-Baby Boomer spectators?

Perhaps if I show them some Nike ads or hand out samples of Gatorade, I could explain the dynamic nature of sport. Nike did an in-house video once that suggested all of us are passionate about sports because we get to see "the impossible made real."

Of my 125 students, will 25 of them (20 percent) have what it takes to join your ranks? Or is it an impossible dream?

Will they care to learn about public-private stadium economics and net present value? V-I-K sponsorship deals and licensing royalty contracts?

As the sports industry lives off the memories of the 10-year bull market (1992-2001), there can be no question that strange times lie ahead. All of the big leagues are counting on Baby Boomers to sustain a golden economic heyday, but the front end of the Boomers have reached their 60s and will soon start losing interest. Some will even die.

Generations X and Y, meanwhile, will merrily gravitate toward the X Games and Xbox where the impossible televises quite nicely. Discussing the World Cyber Championships is, in fact, a favorite of my class.

That said, there are now more than 100 colleges and universities offering sport management and sport business programs. We're sexy, like journalism schools in the 1970s, because our colorful material presents well. But as an industry, are we mature enough (and smart enough) to keep pulling golden eggs from our golden goose?

Baseball's protracted foibles point out that, at a certain level, we still don't get it. We are willing to spit into the wind of public opinion and flip off our loyal customers because we are sport. We appear to do it because we can.

That's why too many of us still hire our nephews or the cabana boy who knew some statistics and seemed to understand the nuances of our product. We tend not to recruit on campus, practice a just-in-time hiring mentality and rarely require much more than a good smile and a willingness to work cheap.

Is that good for my 125 students? Or should I warn them that our industry is trying to get ready for the coming market correction?

I'd like to know because a lot of these 125 kids want jobs with you and believe you will be waiting for them in 2006. I want them to see the glass as completely full. I want to tell them enthusiastically that the best is yet to come. I want them to know we are dynamic thinkers, creative strategists and meticulous planners of our exciting businesses.

What do you want me to tell them?

Rick Burton is executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

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