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Technology revolution's begun, and Stern vows to be first

RICK BURTON

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Men must be decided on what they will not do, and then they are able to act with vigor in what they ought to do. —
Mencius (372-289 B.C.)

February's NBA All-Star Game in San Francisco is now a forgotten memory (for most of us), but I'm still impressed with something Commissioner David Stern wanted done that weekend that went virtually unreported in the general press.

The Friday before the game, the NBA held what I believe was the first-ever league-created Technology Summit. It was staged by the gang at NBA Entertainment at the Ritz-Carlton and was truly a "hitter's ball." Meaning, everyone in the room was a hitter (or thought they were).

You had network folks (Ebersol, Hill, O'Malley, Costas, Russert, Wright, Lazarus), technology drivers (Laybourne, Squadron, Waitt, Ramadan, Goldston, Levy, Nanula, Moses, Kiles, Leonsis, Cuban), NBA and WNBA stars (O'Neal, Smith, Lobo), agents (Armato), league owners (Thomas), league presidents (Ackerman) and people with agendas (Magic Johnson, Stern, Silver).

I apologize if you don't recognize all the names (you should) or if you got left off the list. No hard feelings, right?

The gist of the event was simple. Stern wants to be first in technology adoption, first to share the benefits of technology with global sports fans (particularly young African-Americans) and he wants his little business (the NBA) to get much smarter. Real fast.

Now, you may not think much of "firstness." But Stern does. That's why the NBA was the first league to create its own store, restaurant (NBA City in Orlando), TV network (NBA.com TV) and technology summit.

The league might get some other firsts, too. First junior high school player to jump straight to the pros. First starter to play an entire season without an arrest or indictment. First league to recognize the broadcast model is going to change quickly (is changing already) and change dramatically.

What made the event notable was the commitment the assorted players made. Other than a few small plugs for their technology or personal relevance, most of the panelists involved seemed genuine about sharing their opinions on how things are and how they will be.

One of the more interesting observations was offered by Fox Sports Chairman and CEO David Hill, who noted that "sports can cease being relevant." It led former NBA great Bob Lanier to ask: "How do we keep the NBA relevant?"

In my opinion, some of the answer can be found in this technology revolution. True, the networks are the best in the business at telling the stories. As Hill noted, the networks are the direct descendants of the storytellers who sat around fires 5,000 years ago. For some of the network suits, it's not about bandwidth and digitalization, it's still about telling great stories.

All well and good. But on the other hand, how the story is told and where it's told (i.e., on the Internet, on the phone, on the radio, on the TV, on your Palm Pilot, on your computer) are increasingly important. This is particularly true for members of the African-American community who, according to several speakers, are getting left behind on the technology playground.

"The importance of the Internet hasn't been effectively communicated to the African-American community," said Larry Irving, president and CEO of UrbanMagic.com. "There are 5 million African-Americans online and 35 million who aren't."

Irving is a guy who flat-out gets it. A grad of Northwestern with a law degree from Stanford, he was scooped up by Magic Johnson Enterprises to help develop an Internet portal for the African-American community.

Johnson's group (as voiced by Irving) believes the technology business is missing out on a trillion-dollar opportunity. And they believe nobody can communicate the excitement of what the Internet offers better than NBA stars. If Kobe Bryant, Shaquille O'Neal, Vince Carter, Tim Duncan, Cynthia Cooper or Lisa Leslie says the computer rocks, then we'll find computers in every home the way we currently find TVs.

That opportunity (call it a business responsibility) rests with the technology industry. It has a lot of money to spend (or so it appears).

So David Stern threw a little party and let his message of interest seep around. His league stands ready to facilitate some economic growth. And some NBA growth.

Of course you have to be one of his partners to share in that growth. And there will undoubtedly be some sticky issues on who owns the digitalized image (the player, team, league, network, Web site), but at the end of the day, the NBA plans on remaining relevant to the largest possible audience.

The storytellers will always be welcome. So will the distribution kings (well, at least for a few more years). But believe me, everyone better know what they ought to do.

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