

Shaq Adds a Personal Touch to the Cavaliers' Relationship Strategy

The **Cleveland Cavaliers** basketball team has had a busy offseason. After getting within inches of the NBA finals last season, the team signed center Shaquille O'Neal, adding even more star power to the team led by all-star LeBron James. Off the court, the team is making changes, as well – working to create a long-lasting relationship with fans through dynamic interactions.

"There is a cultural shift within the organization to manage relationships with customers," says Jeff Ryznar, director of strategic marketing at the Cleveland Cavaliers. "It has become more important than ever to speak to customers in the way they want to be spoken to, and tailor to their needs and wants."

Ryznar says this year the team installed a new CRM system and upgraded its email capabilities to deliver more relevant messaging. In addition, the team is taking advantage of the personalities on the team to connect with fans. For instance, Shaq himself delivered the news of his arrival, introducing himself via a phone call to 32,000 fans using automated call tools from Vontoo.

"Hearing Shaquille O'Neal on the other end of the phone when you pick it up was one of the coolest ways that we thought we could introduce him to our fan base," Ryznar says. "It was also intended to drive sales."

Shaq delivered a differentiated message to three separate customer groups. The first group consisted of 19,000 opt-in subscribers to the team's mobile database. For this group, Shaq thanked them for their support and said he was looking forward to the season. For season ticketholders and corporate partners, Shaq thanked them for their specific support as most valuable fans. He also reached out to potential and former season ticketholders – people the team has engaged with or have previously been season ticketholders. These people received a "we miss you" message from Shaq with information about this season's ticket plans and promotions. As a result, the team booked more than 20 appointments with potential season ticket prospects.

In addition to relevant messaging, the Cavaliers offer a number of value-added interactions to season ticketholders based on their feedback. The team conducts a quarterly season ticket advisory panel to discuss a specific topic of interest. In December, Ryznar says, they discussed renewal suggestions. The team learned that season ticketholders wanted incentives to renew their season tickets and requested a price freeze for the 2009-2010 season.

Based on this insight, the team froze prices and instituted a contest for those who renewed. Upon renewal, season ticketholders were entered to win prizes such as playing basketball with a player, receiving a private tour of the arena, having dinner with players, or a playing round of golf with former Cavalier players. "The feedback from the advisory panel allowed us to create a renewal campaign that delivered results," Ryznar says. This year's renewal rate was 74 percent, up 16 percent from last year.

Meeting the needs of virtual fans

Ryznar says his outreach to fans extends well beyond the stadium. The team launched its **Cavfanatic.com** fan site last year, which counts more than 11,000 members. "These are our most loyal online fans," he says. Visitors create individual profiles, connect with friends, participate in message boards and blogs, and upload photos and video related to the Cavaliers. Ryznar says the team provides exclusive content for the site, such as the "Ask Shaq" video feature where he answers questions from members.

The community is highly engaged, and Ryznar says the team shows its appreciation through special ticket offers, merchandise, and prizes. The team offers a special ticket package for members of the site to sit together during games so they can meet and mingle in real life. At the stadium, the team selects only Cavfanatics as participants in its contests during breaks in the game. And Cavfanatics can purchase special uniforms that denote they are indeed fanatics. "It really has spawned into something bigger than we had ever anticipated," Ryznar says. "We're taking a relationship we've established online and having a tangible relationship with them here at the event itself. And that conversion is the ultimate goal."

In each of its relationship efforts, the Cavaliers work to provide value to its fans, regardless of what happens on the court. Ryznar says that in this economy, the team is competing not only with other sporting events but any type of entertainment option, which makes the experience paramount. "It's the experience you get here that you can't put a price on," he says.