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Why the low-tech T-shirt still reigns supreme

In our digitally driven world where wearable technologies, smartphones and tablets are ubiquitous, where the “second screen experience” drives marketing and advertising decisions and curated Facebook, Twitter and Instagram feeds are an essential element of any sports-marketing program, low-tech is enjoying a resurgence. In 2015, “everything old is new again” as hard-copy and paperback books, vinyl records, Polaroid cameras, simple flip phones and even typewriters — all of which were once deemed doomed to obsolescence — are back in fashion.

And for sports teams and marketers, the new low-tech go-to is the humble T-shirt.

To fans, freebie tees are badges of honor. Tossing T-shirts into a crowd “will give you the biggest pop you can get at any sporting event,” explains Joe Dupriest, the Washington Wizards’ chief marketing officer.

It creates a frenzy — but not always in a good way, according to Joe Rospars, founder and CEO of Blue State Digital and principal digital strategist for President Barack Obama’s campaigns, who has reportedly declared the popular T-shirt canon as the most “frustrating and self-defeating” marketing ploy. Among the reasons Rospars cites are that the shirt tossers are too selective, “the overall effect is mostly a taunt” and the frenzy becomes a short-lived entertainment filler for media breaks and half-time rather than an effective tool for fan engagement.

But adding a few low-tech elements such as a friendly (or not-so-friendly) competition between the T-shirt tossers or canon wielders and combining it with a strategic social media promotion that encourages the fans to tweet and post pictures of themselves in the shirt that they caught and the T-shirt toss can become a much better tool for fan engagement. The team logo, colors and arena-as-backdrop

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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reach more of the fans’ network than they otherwise would have with the average break entertainment.

The T-shirt canon isn’t the only method by which sports teams are attempting to capitalize on the cultural popularity of T-shirts; sports teams are exploiting fans’ love of giveaways and free things and their innate desire to belong to part of the “club” alongside fellow fans by eschewing rally towels, pompoms, placards and noise-makers (all of which hinder fans’ ability to clap during key moments) in favor of “shirting” guests in the arenas.

One team — the Golden State Warriors — has gifted over a quarter-million shirts during the last three seasons, draping them over arena seats before opening the doors to the fans. The shirted seats create an impressive, monochromatic visual display — both as fans enter the stadium and during the game itself — and they promote team spirit and unity. “The impression when you walk into the arena and see 19,000 yellow shirts neatly folded over every chair, it tells you, ‘I’ve arrived,’” Chip Bowers, the Warriors’ chief marketing officer, said. “It kind of takes your breath away.”

The Warriors use the center-court video display to coach

reluctant fans to slip on their swag, and although the bulk of the tees are size L and XL, the team keeps a reserve of smaller sizes at customer service kiosks for fans who complain. Even die-hard fans with their own (expensive) replica jerseys are willing to cover them up with their free tees, reportedly because no one wants to be featured on the big screen — and everyone wearing yellow “looks nicer.” For this kind of visual that can be broadcast on television and via social media, most teams reportedly are willing to spend the few dollars for each shirt — and corporate sponsors often underwrite the cost.

While some critics worry that teams may be “cannibalizing” the retail sales of their other team merchandise, Ken Sheirr, the Houston Rockets’ vice president for marketing, sees shirting as an advertising opportunity that lives on “in perpetuity, or at least for a certain amount of time,” given that fans often not only wear, exercise in and lounge around in the freebie tees, they often collect or swap them — especially if the team changes the shirt design before each playoff round or game. While each shirt is a desirable commodity on its own, a full set is priceless to a dedicated fan.

Peter Sorckoff, chief creative

officer and senior vice president for marketing for the Atlanta Hawks, predicted that shirting won’t go away anytime soon for a number of reasons, including the impact of how it looks on television, which is important to teams and to broadcasters as well as the sociological and psychological impact it has on fans. In fact, Sorckoff reportedly believes that shirting encourages more fans to attend games, seeking more camaraderie and less second- and third-screen detachment.

Scott Sonnenberg, the Chicago Bulls’ vice president for corporate sales apparently agreed. “Nowadays, you can watch a ballgame at your house, on a huge flat screen, practically in a movie theater,” Sonnenberg said. “But when you come to a game, you want to feel you’re a part of it, that you can impact the game.” When the whole arena is clad in the same colors and rooting for the same outcome, the players are inspired to perform at their absolute best.

The popularity of themed tees is so great that some teams are tacitly approving a robust secondary market outside the arena. During this past playoff season, the Memphis Grizzlies allowed entrepreneur Joshua Smith to capitalize on guard Tony Allen’s catchphrase “First-team all-defense! First-team all-defense!” with his #1stTeamAllDefense+Allen tee, which sold for \$20 a piece outside the arena. And in 2012, after Zach Randolph spat “I don’t bluff” at Kendrick Perkins during a heated exchange and the Grizzlies adopted those words as its new motto, graphic designers and screen printers starting cranking out “We Don’t Bluff” tees that sold like hotcakes. Other popular slogans include “Nice Move By Beno,” “The Grindfather” referring to Allen, and “Grizzlies v. Everybody,” playing off of the team’s status as perennial underdogs.

Only brazen acts of license infringement seem to have been met with team resistance. Alec

Wilson, a graphic designer who runs Memphicity Design from his garage and regularly prints Grizzlies shirts, has reportedly heard complaints from the team once after one of his shirts featured a photo of Vince Carter instead of Wilson's signature, hand-drawn images. And, according to Wilson, who

acknowledges that the shirt "was a no-no [and] I should have known better," the team was friendly about it, just telling him he couldn't sell the shirt.

John Pugliese, the Grizzlies' vice president for marketing, communications and broadcast, explained that off-market tees are community builders — and

free advertising. "When you have fans interacting with your brand — not just purchasing tickets or watching you on TV but truly taking their time and effort to create artwork, put it on a blank shirt and wear that T-shirt — that type of engagement is what we're all striving for."

Whether fans are catching

them from a cannon, donning them as part of the "shirting" of an arena during the big game or picking craft versions from grass-roots businesses, the classic T-shirt remains one of the best low-tech tools in sports marketing — especially when combined with a little high-tech strategy.