

## **Winning the Customer: Turn Consumers Into Fans and Get Them To Spend More**

By Lou Imbriano and Elizabeth King. Published in 2012 by McGraw-Hill. (214 pages).

*Reviewed by Nels Popp, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Department of Kinesiology and Recreation, Illinois State University.*

At one point in his book *Winning the Customer: Turn Consumers into Fans and Get Them to Spend More*, author Lou Imbriano discusses using his Super Bowl ring as a conversation starter when meeting with potential clients. Even the most casual sports fans are curious to examine such championship glitter and from there, Imbriano had his prospect engaged. *Winning the Customer* has a similar appeal for anyone interested in the field of sport marketing. After all, what sport marketing aficionado would not want an insider's glimpse at how the former Chief Marketing Officer of the New England Patriots created new revenue streams and capitalized on marketing one of the strongest brands in North American professional sport? The business lessons Imbriano shares for current and aspiring sport marketers range from innovative to run-of-the-mill. But the fact he can begin a myriad of examples with a phrase such as "When I was at the Patriots we grew revenue by . . ." makes his tome an intriguing read for anyone with an interest in sport marketing. While at times he dispenses rather mundane marketing and management advice, he also shares several innovative lessons using real-life examples from the front lines of an NFL franchise. It is certainly these stories which make the book click.

Imbriano has spent most of his professional career working in sport marketing. Currently the President and CEO of sport marketing firm TrinityOne (whose clients include the Boston Celtics, New England Patriots, Richard Childress Racing, New Hampshire Fisher Cats, and numerous consumer brand heavyweights like McDonald's, Visa, and Gatorade), Imbriano got his start in the sport industry as a producer for sports talk radio stations in Boston. He gained national prominence, however, as Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer of the New England Patriots, a position he held for nine seasons. He also spent several years as Chief Operating Officer of the New England Revolution Major League Soccer franchise. In *Winning the Customer*, Imbriano shares with readers his rules and practices about marketing, sales, and growing a business after many successful years in the sport industry. Some of those lessons provide rare glimpses inside the marketing efforts of an NFL front office. Highlights include stories about how the Patriots created personal touches with their premier sponsors and high-end ticket buyers, a discussion about the strategy behind successfully marketing NFL club seats, and poignant anecdotes about delivering value to clients rather than selling inventory that does not match sponsors' objectives. Imbriano is a strong advocate of

mining data and building a healthy CRM system, and he illustrates time and again how this extra information pays off in stronger relationships and new revenue. In fact, at one point, while discussing customer reward programs, he suggests, "...you're working toward the long-term sustainability of a customer relationship, so information and data should be viewed as capital, not cash. Give (customers) rewards not only for spending and frequency, but also for data" (p. 33). Just as Oakland A's General Manager Billy Beane craves data and statistics to drive his decision-making (as captured in the book and movie *Moneyball*), Imbriano knows information is king in today's sport industry. He clearly articulates the bottom line for anyone working in sport marketing is not attendance numbers, witty slogans, or clever campaigns, but rather generating revenue (roughly a third of his book falls under the heading, "The Revenue Game: Converting Relationships Into Revenue"). Yet he knows the two most important lessons in generating revenue are developing relationships and collecting data from customers, clients, and prospects. In fact, he spends most of his book focused on these two themes. Imbriano divides his book into three main parts, beginning with marketing foundations ("The Marketing Playbook"), moving to how to build successful relationships with prospects, customers, and partners ("Relationship Architecture"), and finishing with converting relationships into revenue.

In the first section, he lays the groundwork for one of his favorite themes in the book; successful marketers know as much about their current customers as possible. He argues too many organizations and marketers seek new leads, clients, and fans, when they should be spending time getting their most avid customers to spend more. He explains his thinking by suggesting marketers move customers into a series of concentric circles, which he calls rings of avidity. The concept is quite similar to sport marketer Bernie Mullin's frequency escalator. The more customers become attached to the product/team, the better target they are to spend more money. Perhaps his best illustration of the concept, though, comes when he discusses selling club seats, a product the Patriots first introduced during Imbriano's tenure. Club seats, with all their amenities, are a significant jump in price from standard season tickets, but because owners can buy them individually, they do not require as large of an investment as a full-blown sponsorship or luxury suite. When the Patriots first introduced the concept, Imbriano's team targeted sponsors to purchase additional seats. However,

he admits learning a valuable lesson at that point; those seats were a much better product for highly identified season ticket holders. While sponsors had more dollars to spend, highly identified fans of the team were willing to part with a larger percentage of their income to gain better access to the team they loved. The trick for Imbriano's team was finding which fans had the income and were highly attached to their team, which started by mining the Patriots' CRM database.

Perhaps Imbriano's best marketing lessons, however, unfold during his chapters on relationship building. Too many sport marketers and sales representatives rely on commodity selling; pushing inventory on customers and prospects without looking at their clients' needs. Imbriano gives example after example of how consultative selling, meeting prospects' objectives and concerns, ultimately made more money for the Pats because it fostered long-term relationships. For example, Imbriano shares a story about a discussion he had with a television executive who was responsible for advertising during the local broadcasts of Patriots' pre-season games. The executive was concerned Imbriano had not sold all of the available ad slots for the broadcasts. Imbriano argued television advertising was not always the best solution for team sponsors and that he wouldn't sell them spots unless he thought it would help them meet their business objectives. When the television executive suggested he should just sell the spots, Imbriano explains, "...that rationale is exactly how most teams and leagues fail. They sell their inventory without thought or consideration of the sponsors' needs, regardless of the outcome. That's the old way of doing business, and anyone who is doing it that way will soon be looking for a new job. I really don't care what inventory we sell and whom we sell it to. What I am concerned with is that we are adding more partners each year and keeping the partners we have" (p. 96). Later in the book, he discusses a partnership he helped foster between the New England Revolution, a Massachusetts youth soccer program, and Fidelity. This sponsorship was also custom-built to address the sponsors' concern with reaching the right audience, rather than selling signage or a suite at a Revolution game.

The most intriguing stories Imbriano shares revolve around the importance of attending to details when building relationships, a concept he calls "finding the bow." Time after time, Imbriano discusses how the Patriots' marketing staff took one extra step to impress prospects and ensure their clients' always had "memorable moments" during team-sponsored activities; the bow on top of the present. He shared how prospects were invited on the field during team introductions, they were then sent a photo three days later of themselves standing next to a giant inflatable New England helmet as Tom Brady and the team took the field. He shared a story of distributing gift bags to sponsors' hotel rooms during road trips that included the guests' favorite beverages and Patriots' apparel that was always the perfect size. Other highlights, or "wow" moments, in the book included night golfing on the 17th hole at Pebble Beach during a Visa sponsorship event, and guests receiving a welcome message from Rusty Wallace

upon entering a hotel room prior to the Daytona 500. Imbriano also shares a story of when his staff failed to take care of details, stocking a suite to lure Welch's executives with Ocean Spray products. While all of these tales are entertaining anecdotes from sport organizations which can afford such exclusive touches, Imbriano makes an effort to show how all organizations can go the extra mile to find what he calls a "bow" for a client or customer. In fact, it would be easy for readers of *Winning the Customer* to say many of Imbriano's marketing lessons work because the Patriots have such a strong on-field product and powerful brand equity. Imbriano addresses such claims, suggesting he was certainly fortunate to get a new stadium and a high-performing team during his tenure, but good sport marketing requires teams to capitalize on such opportunities. He feels many teams simply enjoy the good times without maximizing their relationships and revenue during such stretches. The Patriots were certainly not such a team under Imbriano's watch.

Not every lesson in the book is entertaining or innovative. Imbriano does include some rather ordinary management and marketing lessons. At one point, he shares the acronym DELIVERS, which includes such standard management lessons as be loyal, deliver on promises, have vision, and be willing to sacrifice. His sections on the seven deadly sins of sales and marketing (greed, sloth, envy, etc.) could be found in any marketing book and his five D's of what it takes to be successful in sales and marketing (drive, direction, desire, discipline, and destination) were hardly ground-breaking pieces of advice. That is not to say the advice is not noteworthy, but it was pretty standard fare. While enjoying Imbriano's book, it is also necessary to read a handful of the author's self-indulgent stories, such as how Imbriano tipped a maître d' to get a table at a high-end New York eatery for his wife, how during his early years in radio he landed a Super Bowl interview with Howie Long because they had a mutual family friend, and how Tom Brady went out of his way to greet Imbriano and his wife during a Kentucky Derby party. While these mundane marketing lessons and name-dropping stories didn't necessarily add much to the book, they comprise a relatively small number of pages.

The sport marketing lessons Imbriano does share in *Winning the Customer* are certainly valuable for any student or industry practitioner. Fifteen years ago, Jon Spoelstra shared Ice to the Eskimos with the sport marketing world. Today Lou Imbriano weaves a very similar tale, but with 21st century updates, including ideas on how best to use social media and guidelines for selling club seats. The lessons he shares are excellent and the examples he can draw from are second to none in the sport marketing world. Because the book combines engaging stories with time-tested marketing principles, this book would provide an excellent secondary text for sport management students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Imbriano's anecdotes will certainly enforce many of the teaching points established in most sport marketing textbooks and taught in many of today's sport marketing classes. Meanwhile, his style and insight will hold the interest of serious sport marketing students.