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Media Business  
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## Passions Key to Targeting Right Groups

**From High School Events to NASCAR, Seek Out What Excites People Most**

By Mark Dominiak

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Special to TelevisionWeek

Just after New Year's I found myself at an event that reminded me of the value of passion.

My wife is an accomplished dance instructor and has taught ballet for many years. One of her students is co-captain of a high school dance team, and requested my wife's help for her solo turn in an upcoming school dance team competition. We attended the competition to support her student's efforts.

That's where the reminder comes in. One might think a high school dance competition would be a somewhat sleepy event. I certainly didn't expect a whole lot, especially at 8:30 on a Saturday morning. I was completely wrong.

By the time the competition was in full swing, few parking spaces remained in the lot, few seats were left in the stands and the energy level was quite high. Volunteers were even working entry paths, barring attendees from walking into bleacher areas during performances in much the same way golf tournaments hold spectators back from fairways between shots.

I was also surprised to discover that not only were the bleachers chock-full of mothers cheering on daughters, but there were plenty of student fans and dads as well, the latter proudly sporting hats and T-shirts supporting their daughters and the teams competing. The environment was in stark contrast to high school football and basketball games I've been to recently where you could practically lie down and nap in the stands during the game.

### Value in Passion

The experience was a reminder that there are plenty of events and properties that never get on a media person's radar screen, but have value because they tap into the passion of their target audiences. Thinking about this local dance competition helped me view the semi-frequent cheerleading contests telecast by ESPN in a different context. It also helped provide more grist for understanding the "Dancing With the Stars" phenomenon.

My wife informed me afterward that many of the school dance teams required parental investments of hundreds or even thousands of dollars at some schools. That doesn't include the costs of travel, T-shirts, tickets or the photo guy hawking professional photos at the event.

Underscoring the point, within days of the aforementioned dance competition, a friend sent us a cellphone photo taken at the recent live Chicago stop of "Dancing With the Stars." In the photo were the friend's daughter and Jerry Springer. How hard is it to get tickets for "Dancing With the Stars"? What about the parking, shirts and merchandise at the event?

There might not be huge ratings for local dance competitions or for the cheerleading competition ESPN telecasts, especially in comparison with the numbers "Dancing With the Stars" pulls, but two things unite both shows: the passion of viewers and the ability of the properties to create multiple consumer touch points.

When events generate those high levels of passion, people make an investment. They take time to attend or view events, sometimes forking out a lot of cash in the bargain. Doesn't it make solid sense for media planners to home in on properties that might be attractive to their client's target audiences?

ESPN sponsors or is involved in a good number of these passion-inciting events. A number of them enjoy on-air coverage as well. The big hitters are the X-Games and outdoor coverage.

The X-Games are slowly increasing their presence, reaching in the neighborhood of 700,000 households in 2005 and almost 750,000 in 2006. Attendance at the events is climbing consistently to the range of tens of thousands of spectators.

ESPN's presence in outdoor can best be demonstrated by properties like the Bassmaster Tournament. With tie-in opportunities like event presence, print and Web components, it's easy to see how outdoor properties on ESPN can provide integrated coverage of events grounded in passion. Conveniently, ESPN's coverage of the Bassmaster season just started this month. You can follow the tournament through February.

Check out ESPN's site to get a feel for the extent of its outdoor properties. I was able to catch a good recap of the 2007 Shooting, Hunting, Outdoor Trade Show and Conference (the SHOT Show), which is the largest trade show for professionals involved with the shooting sports and hunting industries, when I jumped on. The SHOT Show Web site gives even more depth to what ESPN is tapped into.

There are two other elephants in the room when it comes to sports properties that tap into a well of passion yet are rarely leveraged in media plans.

The first is NASCAR. NASCAR's ratings are up and down, but event attendance is still strong. In the neighborhood of 7 million fans attend NASCAR races, around 200,000 per race. Those are some pretty big numbers.

The proliferation of shows (even on cable networks), Web sites, sponsor activity and mainline media coverage all point to the underlying passion NASCAR sparks in its fans. In NASCAR's case, television coverage is probably not really the driving media opportunity associated with the property. Event presence and sponsor integration may be the best ways to tap into fans' emotions.

Soccer is the other elephant in the room. There was ample evidence for the strength of soccer in the 2006 World Cup competition. But again, and perhaps primarily in the U.S., soccer's strength may be more at the grass-roots level than in mass media. Soccer is fast becoming a preferred summer youth sport in the U.S. It is not uncommon for schools to offer a soccer program, but no baseball or football.

And with the demographic composition of the country evolving to include a larger Spanish-speaking population, soccer is likely to deepen its presence as an American pastime. Major markets across the country are seeing strong growth in soccer leagues and events for adults in addition to those for children. A quick example in Chicago is the Que Buena FERIA event, to be held this year July 12-15. True to its grass-roots strength, the event is primarily driven by local, not national, media.

Men and sports are not the only wells of passion. A more general audience and possibly even more passionate following can be found in dog show competitions. It won't take a planner long to uncover a wealth of consumer contact possibilities reaching this passionate contingent. Powered by entities like the AKC, television properties are available on cable and on Thanksgiving Day on NBC. Print, Web and event possibilities abound as well.

There are two areas that flow strongly from television and are passion-inciting favorites of female demos. The first, the daytime drama, has been around for years.

Soap operas are a big industry. Beyond the televised weekday installments, you can't pass through a grocery store checkout line without seeing one or two print extensions begging for purchase. Further vibrancy of the genre can be seen in the advent of SoapNet on cable. Beyond print and television, events can also provide consumer contact points, drawing fans in via summer or mall tours.

The second female-skewing, passion-inciting area is Lifetime Movie Network. If you happen to dive in to qualitative media research with a female target in the 25- to 54-year-old or even older range, it's likely they will eventually mention Lifetime movie viewing as a frequent media interlude. I've been in groups where women have talked about routinely getting together on weekends with friends to watch Lifetime. There's a well of passion available to planners in this space.

## The Youth Market

Not to be left out of the equation are kids and teens. And while contact points to leverage some of the best properties in television don't come easily, there are still ways to tap into the passion they create.

Yet again this week, Mike and Mike made reference to the Wiggles in their morning show. Any kids property that by its gravity can suck in a sports-hound dad must generate significant passion among the children of the household. Kids love the Wiggles and parents will fund their passion. Beyond staples like merchandise, concert tickets are not easy to obtain and require dad parting with some hard-earned coin.

The same can be said of teens and the "High School Musical" property. With similar vibrancy in television, the touring events demonstrate the same youthful passion of the Wiggles. However, tickets can be expensive and they evaporate very quickly. And perhaps of most value, tapping into the passion of "High School Musical" also taps into the significant disposable income teens have available.

Maybe it's time your media plan took advantage of the properties about which your target audience happens to be passionate.

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