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Fred Jones, Founder, Southern Heritage Classic



President, SMC Entertainment
Co-owner, NBA Memphis Grizzlies

Most properties can learn a thing or two from Fred Jones, founder of the Southern Heritage Classic, a 15-year-old Memphis football game pitting Tennessee State University against Jackson State University.

While Jones has always encouraged his corporate partners to activate their sponsorships, he often found it difficult getting the event on their promotional calendar. Another challenge: getting sponsors to view the game as a marketing-driven promotional platform instead of a program strictly centered on building community goodwill.

But things are different this year, with virtually all of the Classic's major sponsors activating their sponsorships with programs that help accomplish their own marketing objectives while simultaneously raising visibility for the event.

The reason behind sponsors' increased activation? The Classic's first-ever sponsor summit.

Below, Jones discusses the importance of sponsorship activation and how he used sponsor summits to get more activation out of his sponsors:

Fred, this year's Southern Heritage Classic saw increased activation by nearly all of your sponsors. How did you get them to step up?

In our case, it was getting them to do the things they wanted to do. Each company has four or five key marketing objectives they wish to accomplish through the sponsorship. Once I got them to recognize that those elements already exist within the classic and focus on those objectives we started to get things done.

This is the culmination of a four or five year process trying to get them to view the game as a marketing platform. I told them the Classic can help with their marketing goals, whether its sales promotion, employee incentive programs, corporate hospitality or customer acquisition. It was a much easier process once we got them focused on those types of programs.

Did your sponsors activate at all in the past?

It takes time to get sponsors to focus on a particular program. If you have an idea today, it might take eight weeks to get the idea incorporated into their corporate structure. It's taken a while for them to understand the opportunities that were already there with the Classic. This has been an ongoing discussion.

Sometimes it's just a matter of timing. One of our sponsors came up with a great idea for a cross-promotion, but it was too late to implement. We talk about these types of programs every year during a post-event meeting with each sponsor. We always talk about how we can get promotions in their system so it will be ready by next September. But they have so many things going on, and trying to get it programmed into their marketing calendar can take a long time.

Our sponsors have always done some type of activation, but this year they took it to the next level. [First Tennessee](#) promoted the Classic in all of their Memphis banking centers. They helped support the event last year, but not anything close to what they did this year. Last year FedEx brought 40,000 employees as part of an employee recognition program. They had an even bigger event this year.

What did you do differently this year to get sponsors to increase activation?

One of the key things we did was to hold corporate partner meetings. We invited representatives from all of our sponsors to sit down and come up with ideas for cross-promotions and other types of activation. Some of the representatives knew each other, and some didn't. Coke and FedEx came up with the idea for the 15th anniversary jacket during the first meeting. Things get moving when ideas are shared.

We followed up with a second meeting where we talked about marketing and advertising plans and the timing of those plans. It's important to get sponsors to focus on the time table so we can get ideas into their promotional calendar by the 15th of July, so by August 1st, everyone is activating at the same time. It helps raise the profile of the Classic, and that helps everyone.

Did you hold the first summit right after last year's event?

It was held earlier this year. But we have individual post-event meetings with each corporate partner. We talk about the good and the bad. It was during those meetings that I tossed out the idea of a sponsor summit. Everyone thought it was a good idea. The toughest part is to get on everyone's schedule. But everyone is supportive of the Classic, and they could all work it out. After the one-one-one meetings with each sponsor, we held two summits with all our sponsors.

Why did you have two meetings? Most sponsor summits are one day affairs.

Sponsors' involvement is ongoing. The first meeting was about brainstorming ideas, which they took back to corporate. The second meeting was about coming up with ways to implement those ideas. The meetings were held three or four months apart.

How were the meetings structured?

They were a one day event. We held the first one at FedEx's headquarters and the second at Nike's. It's very difficult to get representatives from major corporations in one place for any length of time. But their presence demonstrates their level of commitment to the event. They told me they wish other properties they sponsor would hold similar meetings and keep them involved.

Having the meetings at our corporate partners' headquarters was the natural thing to do. Federal Express is our presenting sponsor, so it made sense for them to host the first meeting. We made sure they didn't dictate the agenda.

Getting sponsors to share marketing strategies can sometimes be a challenge. Was it difficult getting them to share ideas?

No. They all were focused on one thing: making the Classic the best it can be. They were all willing to support that goal from both a single-company perspective as well as a group. That can be very hard to achieve.

First Tennessee, Auto Zone and Allstate all have their own marketing agenda, but none of those companies compete. Each company has its own agenda, but it's clear you can achieve individual objectives and still support the Southern Heritage Classic.

Can you share an example of a new cross-promotion this year?

The biggest one was a joint venture between Federal Express and Coke to produce the game's 15th anniversary jacket. That idea came out of a sponsor meeting. The seed was planted, and it grew from there. As we move forward, there will be other promotions. Companies view this as a long-term partnership.

What does promotional activity bring to you as an event?

It doesn't matter if you're the Olympics, the Chicago Bears or the U.S. Open tennis tournament. Sponsor activation is a key ingredient to building an event. Sponsors bring tremendous resources to the table, and they can use those resources to demonstrate their commitment to an event. That sends a real powerful message to the local community.

What A Sponsor Summit Should Accomplish

- Update sponsors on relevant property news, audience research
- Discuss property's added value elements and new benefits
- Share successful sponsor leveraging and measurement activity
- Educate partners about their cosponsors' objectives, promotional plans, time frames and distribution channels
- Open dialogue among cosponsors about joint activation
- Immerse sponsors in property's culture
- Introduce sponsors to property contacts with whom they are likely to interact

Classic Activation

Coca-Cola ran an in-store promotion around its Fanta and Sprite brands offering consumers a free ticket with purchase of three tickets. Coke also ran an in-store sweeps at local Exxon outlets offering tickets, a two-night stay at the Peabody Hotel or a 15th anniversary commemorative jacket.

First Tennessee offered tickets to the game to consumers who opened a new checking account.

AutoZone displayed a Classic poster in the windows of all of its stores in the region.

FedEx held an employee appreciation event in conjunction with the Classic and ran game information on its internal TV system.

Grand Casino Tunica devoted a channel on its in-house TV system to the Classic and touted the event in all of its promotional material.

Budweiser distributor D. Canale Beverages produced and distributed a Classic events calendar.

Allstate Insurance distributed Classic information to agents in Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky and Louisiana.

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