

For Some Associations, Baseball Is a Key Part of Advocacy

Peanuts, Cracker Jack, and a Little Public Policy at Nationals Park



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On any given night, a quick scroll through Twitter could yield a lengthy list of political insiders griping about the Washington Nationals' tenuous relief pitching situation or celebrating a Bryce Harper grand slam.

A few key trade associations have taken this as an advertising opportunity.

If you've attended a Washington Nationals game in the early part of this season, or tuned into a television or radio broadcast, you may have noticed noticed groups like Associated Builders and Contractors, and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association getting their messages out alongside more expected brands like Budweiser.

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The reasoning behind it is quite simple, says James Bowers, creative director and senior vice president at Berman and Company, a D.C.-based PR firm.

“In Washington ... the trade associations, the coalitions, business groups are constantly trying to get to opinion leaders and legislators in places where they may not normally advertise,” he said. “If you’re trying to brand a trade association or brand an issue, I think that’s not a bad vehicle.”

Even with the season less than three weeks old, the presence of targeted advertising is unmistakable.

“In order to maintain our incredible safety record and allow for growth in our system, we need to have a stable, reliable funding stream,” says NATCA Paul Rinaldi in a new radio ad on 106.7 The Fan, which broadcasts Nats games. “We can’t be satisfied with good enough, when great is possible. That’s true in sports, and it’s true in the aviation system.”

The ad, a less-than-subtle nudge at Congress, which is weighing air-traffic-control privatization, is one of many ads NATCA is running on the radio station. While the organization hopes that all listeners take a trip to its website, the intended audience is rather conspicuous.

“Our audience, of course, is Washington-area decision makers and officials, members of Congress, their staffs, the administration, their staffs, members of the aviation community,” said Doug Church, director of communications at NATCA. “The aviation and transportation industries all have headquarters or offices here in the nation’s capital.”

Mike Bellaman, president and CEO of Associated Builders and Contractors, echoed that message.

“Obviously for this area here we’re trying to reach decision makers in the area that make decisions on policy,” he said. “The message we’re trying to send is just some background messaging in excellence ... so that as any kind of policy decision comes up, they understand that foundation.”

These advertising partnerships can originate from either side, though Bowers says more often the associations reach out to the Nationals or the team’s broadcasters.

“There are fewer sales reps out there who are initiating buys versus the trade associations and business organizations reaching out,” Bowers said.

ABC confirmed this trend, saying that they reached out to the Nationals about in-stadium advertisements. NATCA could not confirm which side originated their partnership, which dates back to 2005, when the Na-

tionals arrived in Washington.

When a company like Coca-Cola advertises during a Nationals game, they are doing so for the present and the future. They hope you'll get a Coke now, but they also hope next time you're in the grocery store, you'll consciously or subconsciously choose to buy Coke. Targeted advertising works much in the same way. These companies know that influencers likely won't immediately take their focus off the game to go online. They're just hoping their education campaigns today will make policy-makers think of them the next time an issue affecting their industry arises.

The International Franchise Association ran an advertisement through the opening week of the season, in which it compared the many franchises it represents to a sports franchise such as the Nationals.

The ad sought to catch the attention of viewers, educating them in a "fun and interesting way," according to Jenna Weisbord, senior manager of public affairs & communications at the IFA.

"Educating policymakers and influencers on what is a franchise and what the franchise model provides economically was an important message ... so when legislation or regulations or certain things come to the tables, they fight on behalf of these franchise owners because now they understand," Weisbord said.

With hundreds of groups vying for the attention of people in power, it's important to stand out.




"The more eye catching and edgy the advertising, the more likely you're going to get attention," said Bowers. "Those that are going to be text heavy and boring and dry, I don't know what the value of those is."

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