



SPORTS+ENTERTAINMENT+MEDIA GOLD WINNER

The NBA: Where amazing happens.

The Business Situation and Campaign Objectives

The National Basketball Association (NBA) is one of the most popular sports and entertainment properties in the world with millions of enthusiastic fans. It would, therefore, come as a surprise to most that the NBA faced some business challenges heading into the 2007–08 season.

For three straight years, NBA television viewership had been experiencing a decline.¹

This decline needed to be reversed for several key reasons:

1. Viewership is a critical success measure of a modern sports property.
2. Viewership numbers also provide a measure of fan interest and engagement, and directly affect ticket sales, sponsorships and merchandise sales.

Reversing viewership declines also became a more difficult challenge given the proliferation of television and entertainment options.

It was imperative that the NBA understand, through research, the reasons for this decline in viewership in order to define a clear brand communications strategy. The goal of that strategy was to ultimately reignite passion for the NBA among its core audience of men 18–34 and reverse the league’s declining viewership numbers and impact key business measures.

The Research Story

This NBA challenge was no small task. To accomplish it, the NBA and the agency designed a coordinated research program that would help provide insights and understanding from a variety of angles – and, in some cases, explored areas that the NBA had never looked at before. Together, we set out to unearth a better, more current understanding of the league’s fans, their drivers and barriers of interest, as well as the larger sports and entertainment marketing environment in which the NBA operates.

An Impossible-to-Identify Identity Offline

On the surface, it’s hard to believe that the NBA would have any problem at all. With powerhouse partners activating around the league, the NBA enjoys tremendous exposure and visibility. So why the viewership decline?

We started by talking directly to a mix of avid and casual fans. In a series of Qualitative Sessions and In-Home Friend Groups, we listened to fans discuss league perceptions, their engagement with the game, and why they were fans in the first place. [Appx. 1] Throughout each of these meetings, the most compelling finding came from a number of branding exercises: while current and superficially-engaged fans had no problem talking about the identities of *other* brands and sports leagues, when it came to the NBA, a clear description never emerged. They were able to talk at length about the teams, players, games and league specifics, but when it came to the NBA itself: silence.

Latent, But Polarized, Passion Online

The lack of identity around the NBA was puzzling, as it certainly was not a product of low visibility. Moreover, the league was not suffering from an absence of interest on the Web. A customized MotiveQuest Buzz Analysis study (a first for the league) studied basketball conversation online and showed an involved, engaged and talking-all-the-time fan base. The NBA was even the topic of more buzz online than any other professional sport. [Appx. 2]

However, analysis revealed that a large portion of the conversations and sentiment around the NBA was polarized. Data uncovered that the NBA brand invokes passion. This passion uncovered a progressive and popular cultural brand that is often caught in the middle of discussions about larger social issues. Fan enjoyment in debating about basketball, the league and everything that surrounds it meant the NBA brand often was caught in the crossfire, ultimately obscuring the league's identity.

The Need To Lead The Conversation

In Qualitative Conversations with average and avid fans, it became apparent that the NBA had ceded control of its own story. The perception of the NBA that emerged was more about the glitz, glam and celebrity that surrounded the game than what was going on in the game itself. As one fan put it, "None of this advertising shows the sport anymore – it's all about the bling lifestyle off of the court."²

To dive deeper into this, we carried out a Brand Communications Audit to analyze the universe of messaging around the NBA.

What we found confirmed what fans had alluded to in the focus groups: the bulk of messages were focused on individual players and their off-the-court lifestyles. The media weight supporting these messages was coalescing to create a conversation about the NBA that was distant from the actual game and the sport of basketball.

As a result, the NBA was spending its time and energy trying to provide a counterweight that spoke of teamwork, fundamentals and effort, all of which are important aspects of the NBA's character but were not particularly resonating with fans at the time. [Appx. 4, 5]

It was increasingly easy to see why the identity of the NBA was so hard to define. There was no middle ground and no consensus, only dueling messages that did not connect.

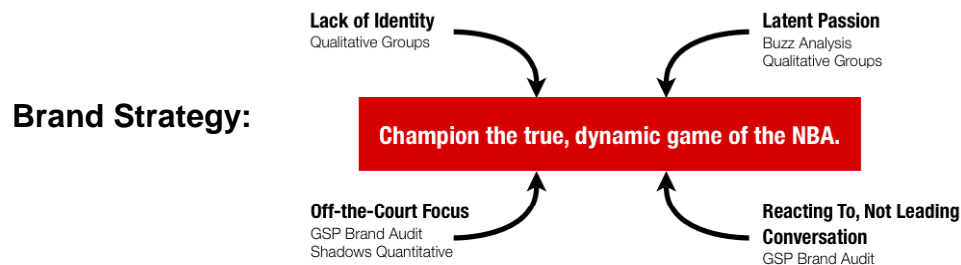
Remembering To Be Our Own Biggest Fan

The best of the game was being obscured: charisma was seen as ego, talent was being perceived as showboating and captivating personalities were being misinterpreted as individualistic.

A custom Shadows Quantitative Study, carried out online, confirmed this: non-fans and casual NBA fans were significantly more likely to attribute shadow/negative characteristics to the league. By contrast, avid fans were focused on the positives of the game. [Appx. 6] Avid fans were not distracted by all that went on around the league and outside the game. In contrast, casual fans could see and focus on very little else.

Finding Focus

Everything we had uncovered pointed us in one direction: returning the focus of the NBA conversation to the incredible, dynamic and exciting action taking place in the game. In spite of all the confusing messages and conversations around the NBA, our discussions with fans had revealed that one did not have to go far to find what kept fans “in the game.” Yes, they were frustrated by the perceived individualism of some players. But what kept them from abandoning the sport altogether was that nothing else has the energy, the charisma, and the brand of athleticism found every night in the NBA. Respondents continually referenced that there were things “that happen in the game that make it amazing to watch.”³



What the NBA needed, and what fans wanted, was for the league to be its own biggest, best and most ardent fan. We needed to remind fans about the NBA not as it existed in pop culture, but rather as it existed “on the court.” The culture of the NBA lifestyle didn’t need to be on a pedestal -- the essence of the game did.

The Campaign – “Where amazing happens.”

With research informing a clear brand strategy, the next daunting challenge was to express this creatively.

The *Where amazing happens.* campaign is a communications idea created to reconnect fans to everything they love about the NBA – the sport, the fans, the coaches, and yes, the players.

The line worked by allowing any compelling attribute of the league to be placed in the framework: “Where ____ happens.” (e.g. Where commitment happens.; Where wanting it more happens.; Where 81 points happens.). The integrated campaign was launched in October 2007, prior to the start of the 2007–08 NBA season, using TV, print, interactive and OOH elements.

Where amazing happens. TV spots opened a campaign that brought NBA stories to life with animated NBA still photography combined with “Where ____ happens.” supers. These became the foundation of the campaign. And rather than treat the game as the usual thunderous TV sports spectacle, the communications established a tone for the season-long effort that did not diminish the beauty of the game, but took it seriously -- even reflectively.

To tap into the currency of the season’s drama, commercials featured 2007–08’s best emerging NBA stories: Kevin Durant’s arrival as a rookie in Seattle (“Where wearing the dream happens.”), the winding road of Steve Nash to become the NBA’s Most Valuable Player (“Where you have arrived happens.”) and basketball passion reignited in Boston after the surprising Celtics trade for Kevin Garnett (“Where I remember happens.”).

When it came time for the NBA Playoffs and The Finals, both our qualitative research and our MotiveQuest online research had revealed the insight that, in the NBA postseason, fans are united with the sport by the same dream shared by every player, team, and coach: the dream to win it all. But, the fact remains, only one of them will. The campaign tapped into this powerful truth using a simple split-screen device that juxtaposed two rival NBA players against one another ending with the line, “There Can Only Be One.” The campaign ran from April 2008 through the NBA Playoffs and The Finals in June. Shooting two to three players on each potential playoff-bound team, the campaign was able to create spots, print ads, OOH and interactive creative that could highlight each game and the exact team/player rivalries happening that very night throughout the NBA Playoffs and The Finals.

In effect, the campaign behaved as a fan did: keeping current with the season story. The key to driving viewership was to arm fans with the matchups and tune-in information for each game. Eighty-five percent of the Where amazing happens. Playoff campaign impressions used innovative RSS feeds to create real-time online and offline communications that highlighted each night’s upcoming matchups.⁴ Custom banners and AOL Instant Messenger skins presented users with scores, schedules and video highlights. Digital outdoor boards used RSS feeds in LED displays to feature tune-in information and real-time scores. This kept fans up to date and was an OOH first.⁵

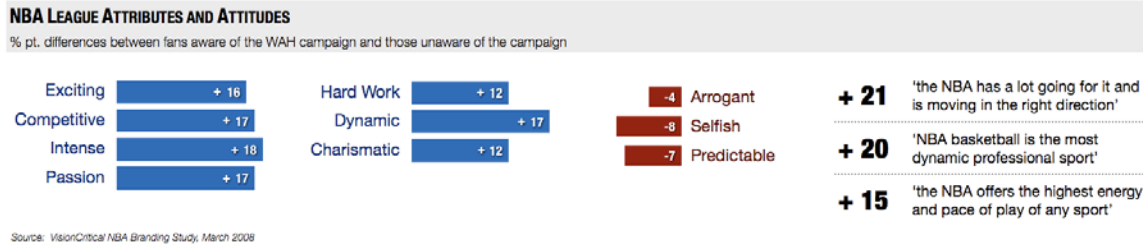
The Results

Where amazing happens. did not just set out to impact the NBA business short-term. Our hope was to create a long-term platform for the NBA that could continue to create emotional reengagement with the league and the game. We wanted fans to reembrace the game and remember exactly why they loved it. And they responded.

Where amazing happens. struck a chord by getting fans excited again, triggering their involvement in both the league and the campaign. It also resonated within popular culture at-large. Moreover, this passion translated to measurable business results, reversing the decline in viewership and increasing key NBA business measures.

i. Where Reigniting Fan Passion Happens

The following chart illustrates that exposure to Where amazing happens. shifted fans perceptions almost immediately, driving increases across key brand image attributes and overall perceptions of the NBA.



This data reflects that this was the first time the NBA had ever attempted to track a campaign effort. There is no historical data to benchmark against.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, fans gave us quite the compliment, showing us they were reengaged by adopting the campaign as basketball vernacular and replicating it.

So far, there are 3,380 fan-created replications of Where amazing happens. on YouTube.⁶

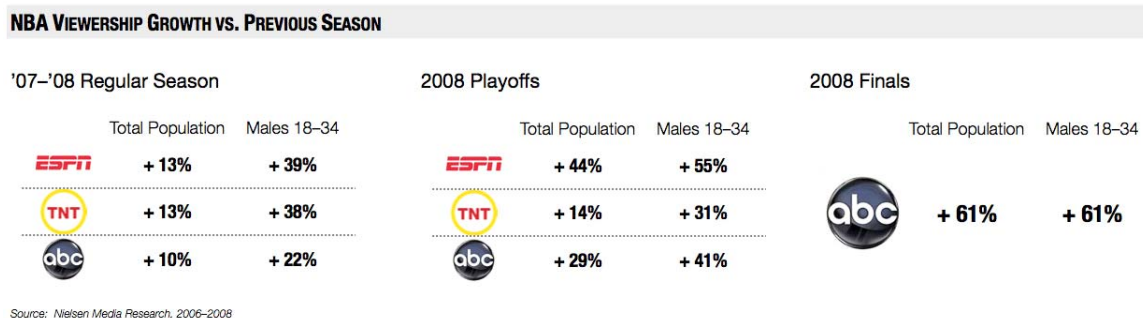
The “Where _____ happens.” device was picked up by countless sportswriters, bloggers, and broadcasters. ESPN’s Bill Simmons, an NBA fan as well as critic and arguably the most read blogger in sports wrote in his 2007–08 Season Predictions: “You’ll never grow tired of those ‘The NBA is Amazing’ commercials.”⁷

The Where amazing happens. NBA Playoff campaign was featured on the “Today” show by Matt Lauer and parodied by the ESPN “SportsCenter” anchors, NBC’s “Saturday Night Live,” and even rapper 50 Cent.⁸

ii. Where Watching More NBA Happens

Driving viewership was critical for the NBA, and Where amazing happens. helped reverse the decline in viewership for the NBA Regular Season, the NBA Playoffs and The Finals.

Across all networks, average viewership increased substantially versus the previous season. While this increase was greatest among our key men 18–34 demographic, viewership swelled among the overall population.



To top it off, the campaign helped migrate fans from the NBA Playoffs to the league's championship series: The Finals.

All in all, the six Finals games represented the six highest-rated and most-viewed programs amongst all viewers (people +2 years of age) on television in June 2008.⁹

iii. Where Driving Hard Business Results Happens

At the end of the day, none of the above results would have mattered if Where amazing happens. had not helped the NBA cash register ring.

In addition to the viewership gains, the NBA experienced increases over the 2006-07 season in attendance, merchandise sales and NBA.com traffic.¹⁰

And... Where Obama and Hillary Happens?

The jewel in the Where amazing happens. crown was a sign that the campaign not only found resonance with basketball, or even resonance in sports, but that the campaign had been absorbed into the biggest playoff in America during 2007–08.

For its May 5, 2008 issue, *TIME* Magazine borrowed the NBA's Where amazing happens. campaign idea at the eleventh hour of the long, drawn-out Democratic nomination process. It featured Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama on the cover of *TIME* under the heading of "There Can Only Be One" (The NBA was credited for the idea on the inside cover.). [Appx. 7]

In the end, as we all know, "the one" was Obama. And we are not going to claim that the NBA campaign helped his. However, we can say one thing with certainty: the NBA's current 2008–09 season has begun with a lot more excited basketball fans just waiting to see what happens next. And we would not have been able to get to this point without the program of unfolding research and analysis conducted in 2007 and 2008.

Appendix — Notes

1. 2004–2008 Nielsen Media Research Data
2. NBA Qualitative Research Study, June 2007
3. NBA Qualitative Research Study, June 2007
4. 2007–08 Agency Media Tracking Data
5. Clear Channel Historical Data
6. Youtube.com Data
7. ESPN, *The Sports Guy*, October 31, 2007
8. *G-Unit's 50 Cent Borrows From NBA Playoffs for New 'TOS' Album Commercial*, Poplife.biz, June 13, 2008
9. June 2008 Nielsen Media Research
10. NBA Proprietary Data

Appendix — Additional Charts

Appx 1 — Focus Group Details



Qualitative Focus Groups:

Avid Fans

Casual Fans

All Demos

18 Groups

6 Markets

— **Boston**

— **Chicago**

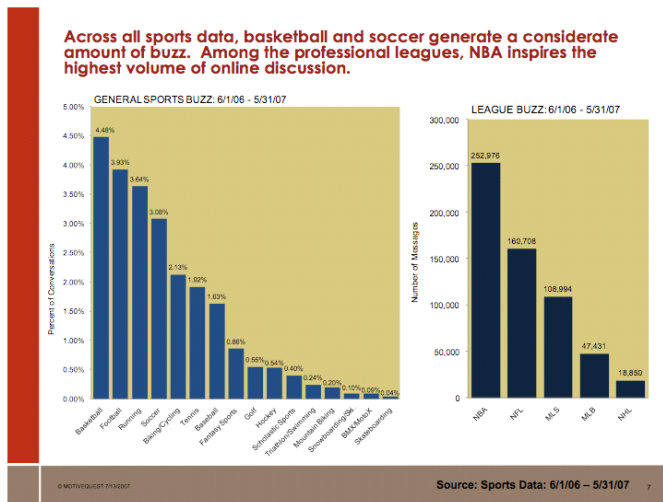
— **Denver**

— **Phoenix**

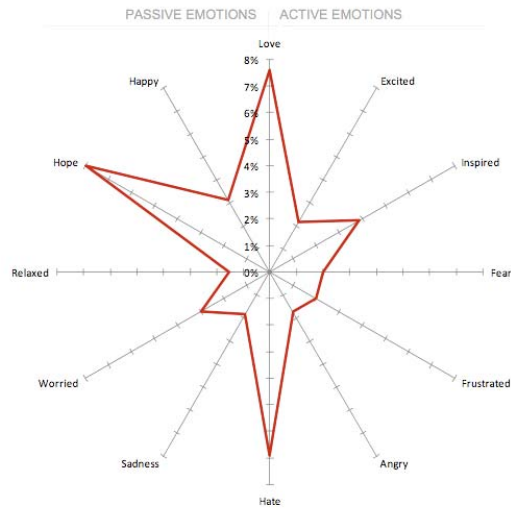
— **Oakland**

— **Los Angeles**

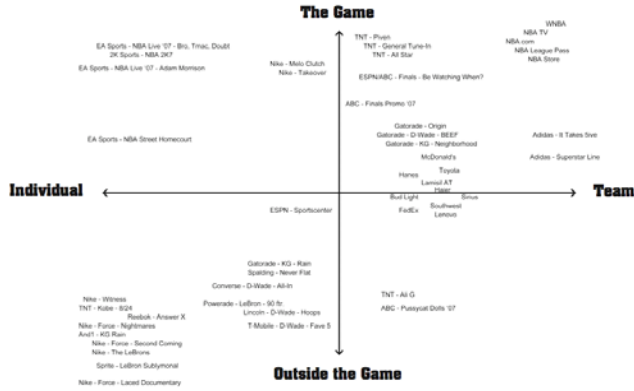
Appx 2 — MotiveQuest Total Buzz Chart



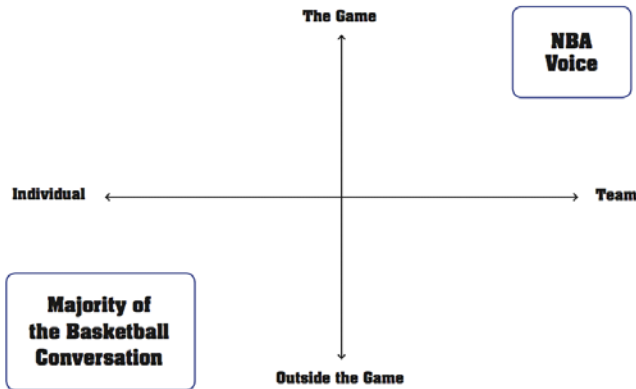
Appx 3 — MotiveQuest NBA MotiveMeter



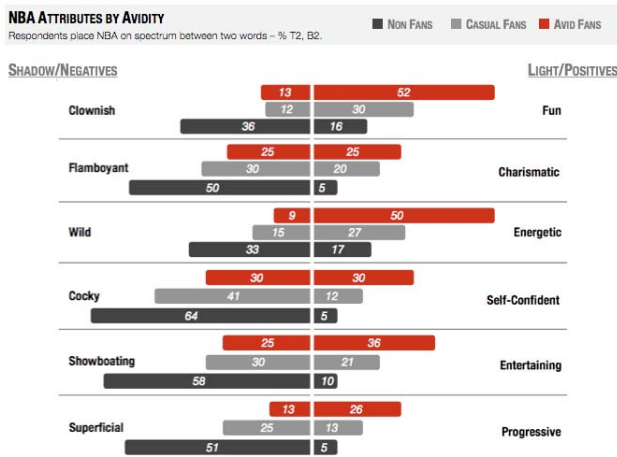
Appx 4 — Brand Communications Audit Map



Appx 5 — Brand Communications Summary



Appx 6 — Custom Shadows Quantitative



Appx 7 — Time Magazine Cover: May 5, 2008

MAY 5, 2019



The Texas Polygamy
Sect: Who Speaks
For the Children?

The Diaries
Of the Polish
Anne Frank



Waitlisted at Your
College of Choice?
The Dos and Don'ts

TIME



THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE

The Incredible
Shrinking
Democrats
BY JOE KLEIN

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scenarios
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