



## Sports Marketers Discuss Politics, Protests and Fragmenting Ratings

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Like the rest of television, sports are finally having to adjust to the rapidly changing media landscape. But even though those changes are coming on fast and furious, sports marketers feel that live sports remain a potent offering on any platform.

An issue that continues to challenge the NFL is that of player protests during the playing of the National Anthem. The movement, started by now former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, was originally meant to shine a spotlight on police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. But in Trump's America, the phenomenon of players linking arms or kneeling during the anthem has evolved into a bigger issue with which the NFL continues to wrestle.

"America is passionate about football and patriotism is molded in everything we do. We need to respect and admire what all that the men and women in this country do to protect us," said Renie Anderson, senior vice president, sponsorship and partnership management, NFL. "To be clear, we want the players to stand but we also respect the right to peaceful protest. Whatever we can do to ensure that our sport is adequately represented is our focus."

Since its inception in 2003, the Sports Marketing Symposium, held on Wednesday and Thursday this week at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in New York City, has explored the creative and innovative platforms sports brands support in their quest for fan engagement. The focus is on the marketing plans of some of the more active brands in sports, addressing both best practices and emerging trends in sports marketing.

The first session, titled "Eyes Wide Open: What's Keeping You Up at Night?," offered a discussion of some of the more pressing issues in this rising age of technology and current controversial state.

"The first issue, I think, is how to overcome that hurdle when someone does not have the cable code where he can watch content on his mobile device," said Keith Wachtel, executive vice president and chief revenue officer, NHL. "Then there is the issue of measurement. We don't have a concise measurement system for tracking people all the time, and that is a concern when the traditional ratings tend to decrease in this more fractionalized environment."

More concerning for sports, perhaps, when an average live event can last for a number of hours, is keeping millennials interested.

"As marketers, we need to figure out the best way to reach the younger generation," said Mark Wright, vice president, media services and sponsorships, AT&T. "On a low-attention-span vehicle like mobile, a quick six-second ad will do the trick. But when someone is leaning back and watching a long-form engagement, they may have more tolerance for a quality commercial that is longer in length. It is a balance that we need to always consider."

#### How Social Media is Impacting Live Sports

"As we approach delivering content across all different experiences, we also have to recognize that what consumers are doing on a platform like Twitter or Facebook could be entirely different," said Tom McGovern, president, Optimum Sports. "From a monetization standpoint, we need to understand more people than ever before are consuming their content outside of a linear environment. And we have to understand that declining ratings traditionally is the norm across all platforms, not just football."

"More importantly, we need to remember that our business is really built off of fragmentation," he added. "So, instead of running from a challenge, we need to take advantage of it."

#### The 'Sky is Not Falling'

Contrary to published reports, in which the NFL's declining ratings continue to be explored, the live nature of sports - particularly Fox's concluding seven-game World Series, and NBC's upcoming Super Bowl LII and Winter Olympics - remains an integral part of any platform.

"We really do have the best product that really does unify people, so I think this 'sky is falling' mentality focusing on declining ratings is premature," said Anderson. "We face challenges similar to other platforms, which is a reflection of the changing world of technology. When all is said and done, sports remains a critical element on any platform."