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Marketing Intercollegiate Athletics at the NCAA Division III Level

Cheryl Robinson

Cheryl Robinson is the sports marketing coordinator in Office of Athletics & Recreation at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Pomona, New Jersey, USA. A Stockton graduate with a B.A. in business, she also works with the Stockton men's basketball team. The NCAA Division III Stockton Ospreys are a member of the New Jersey Athletic Conference and have produced an NCAA championship in men's soccer, nine individual NCAA track and field national champions, plus multiple NJAC championships, Final Four appearances, NCAA tournaments, ECAC titles, and All-Americans.

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Being a Sports Marketing Coordinator for a Division III college can be simultaneously exciting, challenging, frustrating and rewarding. Unlike Division I schools, who have entire marketing departments, I am solely responsible for the promotional needs of our teams. (According to the schools' websites, only two out of the ten colleges and universities in the New Jersey Division III Athletic Conference have a marketing position within the Athletic Office.)

The challenge begins with the fan base. The Division I fan base has been established for years. Enthusiastic loyal fans, college/university alum, athlete alumni, community supporters and endorsements by Fortune 500 companies contribute to the success of the marketing campaigns. Division III, on the other hand, is a completely different situation. Although each

DIII school may be known within its respective community, it is difficult to brand on a national level. My college is one of the few New Jersey DIII schools that does not have a football team. Without football we have to rely on the other two popular sports, soccer and basketball, to draw the crowds. Attendance is about the same for both sports, but basketball has a stronger student and faculty fan following, while the soccer fans are mostly comprised of parents and friends of the athletes. The women's games average about half of the spectators as the men's games, and, on average, we bring in about three hundred dollars per game night.

Of course the fan base and recognition factor greatly influence fundraising abilities. According to an article written by David Dykes and Ed McGranahan on Greenvilleonline.com entitled "University Athletic Funds are Public Money



[HTTP://WWW.THESPORTSBUSINESSEXCHANGE.COM](http://www.thesportsbusinessexchange.com)

Experts Say,” some athletic departments, such as Clemson and the University of South Carolina, raise \$50 million dollars a year. People feel the need to support their favorite teams; believing that their checks, whether small or large, make them part of the team or in some way help the Irish, the Bruins, the Rams, etc., win the championship. The events of a DIII school are celebrated on a much smaller scale. The fundraising events that I coordinate for our athletic scholarship fund bring in an average of \$10,000 each. Paul Plinske, Ph.D., an Associate Director and Graduate Program Director in Sport Administration at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse addressed this situation in *Raising Friends, Raising Funds*:

NCAA Division III donors are typically alumni and parents of student-athletes, as opposed to boosters and corporations. Their motivations for giving are more about commitment and loyalty than getting box seats or free advertising space. Since Division III athletics places the highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience, athletic fund-raisers at this level must view their job responsibilities differently than those in Division I. Promoting nationally recognized teams and giving donors access to major sporting events is not possible, or a part of the philosophy. This, of course, can make raising funds more difficult. What's an athletic fund-raiser to do? He or she must start by defining the primary objective differently. The goal is not to raise funds, but to develop the program, provide vision and leadership, and create friends of the program. Most importantly, fund-raisers must establish interpersonal relationships with key constituents. Wining and dining isn't necessary here. However, showing an interest and articulating the institution's vision are.

Successful marketing strategies are tailored to the community. Many top Division I schools already have athletic fan/booster clubs up and running. These programs allow parents, alumni, students and community members to donate a certain amount of money which supports athletics. The amount that they pledge/donate determines their level of membership and

what they receive (season tickets, number of t-shirts, gym membership, etc.) Like DI, many DIII schools have also implemented a booster program to help raise funds for athletics. On ESPN.com Lauren Reynolds quotes Associate Athletic Director Mike Broeker of Marquette University in her article *Creativity Is King When Marketing Smaller Programs*, “In the last couple of years, we’ve diversified our ticket plans and introduced mini plans,” explained Broeker. “We try to tailor these packages to specific groups; weeknights might be better suited for young professionals, whereas weekend plans might appeal more to families. We’re trying to create something for everybody who enjoys basketball.”

It’s up to me to brainstorm marketing strategies to increase attendance at the games. Creative promotions have been the key. For example, our team mascot is the Osprey, and I’m in charge of a pilot program called “O-fans” which seems to be catching on. Students are encouraged to attend all the athletic games and show their school spirit. There is even a designated section of the bleachers called the O-zone where they congregate together to cheer for the team. I am also currently working on creating a highlight video of our teams. It includes footage of the games as well as comments from the coaches, players and fans. These will be viewed during open houses and throughout the sports center. They will also be used for recruitment purposes.

I feel that the promos sell more tickets at the DIII level whereas at the DI level they’re just an extra bonus/perk; DI tickets sell themselves. Don’t ask me to explain it, but I discovered the “Phenomena of the Free T-Shirt.” People go crazy over free t-shirts and feel it’s their sole right to receive them. I’ve offered rally rags, awareness bracelets, pendants, gift certificates, shoelaces, pompoms and car decals, but nothing compares to t-shirts. Free t-shirts can

double the attendance at conference games and rival games. Add free food and you have an unbeatable combination.

As a smaller school we have to establish our brand by reaching out to the community and organizations to show our support. We host a “Run/Walk Race” each year to raise money for our scholarship fund. We include Health Education sponsored by the local hospital to raise awareness of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. We provide t-shirts promoting the event and sponsors as a means of advertising. We also work with the Boys and Girls Club and Big Brothers Big Sisters to host athletic clinics with our sports teams. Not only does it help the children at these organizations, but it helps our athletes give back to the community and get to know some of their supporters. In conjunction with these organizations we hosted an NBA camp called “Nothing But Net.” For one week a different NBA player came and spoke to the basketball campers. In addition to basketball skills, they stressed the importance of education, teamwork and a positive attitude. This is just one of the ways that we are able to start branding ourselves on a national level and breaking the barriers of being a DIII school.

There are advantages to the smaller size of the DIII colleges. Classroom sizes can sometimes be as little as 30 students; professors and administrators are able to work more closely with the students and athletes and to have a one-on-one relationship with them. For me it’s easy to become familiar with the dedicated supporters who come to all the athletic events. I have a chance to talk with them and get to know who they are and which sports are their favorites. It enables me to establish a rapport with them. In 2009 when the men’s basketball team made it to the NCAA DIII Championship game in Salem, Virginia, the fans that were with us from the start of the season were with us at the end of the season, and we were all able to share the experience

together.

Regardless of the size of the school, the reality of sports marketing today is dependent on multi-media exposure. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have greatly increased our ability to reach an extended fan base and create a more level playing field for the teams and the front office. In the article *Schools, Coaches Cash In On Lucrative Media Deals* on usatoday.com, Michael McCarthy explains:

Across the nation, schools are combining media and marketing rights with their entire athletic programs — from coaching shows to radio broadcasting rights for football, men’s and women’s basketball and other sports to websites — and selling them to the highest bidder.

Many schools in the DIII conference are now broadcasting their basketball games live over the Internet on their websites. The goal ultimately will be to have the local cable stations carry the broadcasts, giving them more exposure.

Marketing strategies have evolved over time. It’s not a matter of reinventing the wheel as much as redefining what the wheel is. Although there are many differences between Division I and Division III athletics, one thing is apparent. They all want their teams to succeed.