



Why the Red Sox Brand Keeps Hitting Home Runs

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Although legendary sports franchises like the New York Yankees baseball team and Manchester United football club have achieved global brand awareness, some would argue that baseball's Boston Red Sox has become the premier brand in sports today, particularly under a relatively new ownership team that fully recognizes and exploits the brand in unique ways.

While the Yankees brand has long been characterized by its signature pinstripes and brazen successes, the Red Sox built a brand based, among other things, on its 86-year, Sisyphean quest for a championship. Futility at the end of countless valiant seasons transformed the team into an undaunted everyman, a sympathetic underdog that fought the good fight to the end. The legacy of near victory/inevitable defeat spawned a different kind of response among its passionate followers -- a devotion that is religious in nature, a complex weave of familial and communal bonds that transcend mere fan worship.



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Given that the Red Sox finally overcame alleged curses and nearly nine decades of futility by winning the World Series in 2004 (and as of this writing, are in the playoffs for a record third straight season), the question arises: What happens now? How will the fans accommodate this unfamiliar notion that they have a championship team? Will the brand itself be altered, even destroyed, by that cathartic moment of success?

Sky-high Ratings

The numbers best answer the question. The team has sold out more than 220 straight games, including the entire 2005 season, at its legendary ball field Fenway Park. The Red Sox in 2005 became the top-drawing road team in Major League Baseball for the first time in its history. Television ratings for local Red Sox games on the New England Sports Network skyrocketed during the 2005 season and shot even higher during games between the Red Sox and Yankees, a rivalry unparalleled in professional sports. Seven Yankees-Red Sox games on ESPN during the 2005 season attracted a 60% higher audience than its average baseball audience.

In addition, sales of Red Sox merchandise soared for many weeks after the World Series victory, putting the team in first place in merchandise sales for that time period and a solid second for the 2005 season (behind the Yankees). According to Neil Schwartz of SportsScanInfo, a West Palm Beach, Fla., research firm, the Red Sox sold \$130 million worth of merchandise in 2004 and by the third week of September 2005 had already surpassed that figure with \$142 million in sales.

After the euphoria of victory inevitably wears off, the Red Sox brand will remain viable, pundits say, because it is built upon many factors that have nothing to do with championships. Great brands endure for a raft of reasons -- quality, integrity, consistency, reliability, vitality -- but marketing specialists point out that it is the emotional connections between customer and product that lift some brands to even loftier heights. And at its core, the Red Sox brand is built upon emotion.

"Certainly the Red Sox are a brand that evokes tremendous passion," says Wharton marketing professor [David Reibstein](#). "You can find passion around automobile brands or clothing but the passion around the

Red Sox is even greater. It is not only stronger than most brands in general, but stronger than other sports franchises as well."

Stuart Layne, president of Seven2 Sports Marketing, a marketing and brand consultancy in Andover, Mass., agrees. Layne, who was the executive vice president of marketing and sales for the Boston Celtics for nine seasons and worked in a similar capacity for the Seattle Mariners, is a Yankees fan but acknowledges the power of the Red Sox brand. "In all my days in sports and as a sports fan, I've never seen a team have an impact on the psyche of a community like the Red Sox," Layne says. "You could put a Red Sox logo on a pile of leaves and it would sell."

Among the unique attributes of the Red Sox brand is its allure outside the New England region, adds Wharton marketing professor [David Schmittlein](#). The 86-year drought between World Series victories made the Red Sox enticing to fans in other parts of the country who admired and empathized with the team's regular, unrequited brush with success, he notes. "For many people, there is the sense that the human side of the team got in the way of the greatness that was envisioned for them, and that creates a great attribute for the brand."

When the franchise was sold in 2002 to an outside owners group led by John Henry, Tom Werner and Larry Lucchino, the Red Sox Nation worried about its future. It needn't have been concerned. The new owners quickly demonstrated an understanding of the brand and vowed to stay true to its core. Henry is a hedge fund billionaire and former owner of the Florida Marlins. Werner is a Hollywood television producer who made his fortune with "The Cosby Show," "Roseanne" and other megahits. Lucchino is a lawyer who became a savvy front office executive with the Baltimore Orioles and later the San Diego Padres. He is the team's CEO and president.

"A sports brand is about the emotional attachment people have to it," says Layne. "What the new owners did as well as anybody in America is take that emotion and make it accessible to all fans. The previous owners were a very closed group that wouldn't communicate effectively with the press or let their fans close to the team."

"Baseball Is Personal"

Putting together a World Series champion might have been enough for some teams, but the Red Sox owners and executives were not content to maintain the status quo. From the outset, they found ways to enhance the brand in imaginative ways while maintaining respect for its core attributes.

"Baseball is personal," says Charles Steinberg, Red Sox executive vice president for public affairs and the team's marketing impresario. "If you do the good deeds, the money will follow and you will call that marketing." According to Steinberg, the new owners sought to preserve and incite the passions of Red Sox fans in three key ways:

- **The team:** Lucchino and his young protégé Theo Epstein, the Red Sox's 30-year-old general manager, have brought in players to take the team to a championship level. Steinberg notes that for most of the history of baseball, this was the extent of marketing. "If you won, you drew; if you didn't win, you didn't draw. There are probably not too many dinosaurs that still ascribe to that flawed business philosophy."
- **The venue:** Although Fenway Park had frayed at the edges, the new owners decided to stay rather than build a new stadium. Seeing countless opportunities to improve the park, they added hundreds of seats above the famed Green Monster wall in left field, a new café-style seating area in deep right field and a pedestrian mall outside the stadium where fans can stroll before, during and after games. They added rest rooms, concession stands and other

amenities to make the old ballpark more comfortable and accessible. They built upon the "Friendly Fenway" theme that the previous owners had initiated, recognizing the impact Fenway has on children and adults alike. As a result, Fenway has become a favorite tourist destination for visitors to the region.

- **The fan experience:** Steinberg talks eloquently about this aspect of the brand, pointing out that beyond the game and the venue, there is the impact of imparting a positive family experience for those who come to games. "It is about embracing families with personal warmth, kindness, music, videos and everything that gives a family a reward for having made the investment in a night out," Steinberg says. It is about how the ushers treat people, the parking lot attendants' behavior, the ticket takers, the people selling food and drinks in the stands. "It is a spiritual product that, if done well, makes you say when you go home, 'Wow, I want to do that again.' The fan experience must be excellent whether you win or lose."

Branding includes small touches as well, like picking small children out of the stands before each game to be honorary batboys and batgirls, yelling "Play ball!" and creating extensive alliances with local charities and businesses. Despite having the highest ticket prices in the major leagues, the owners have managed to keep enough lower-priced tickets available -- they sell 1,000 \$12 tickets to each game -- to avoid turning Fenway into a haven for fat cats.

"You would think the Red Sox, because of the high ticket prices, would become one of the upper class franchises. But it is still considered the people's team," says Reibstein. "One of the keys to that was to stay in Fenway Park. It would have been the death of the brand to move to a modern day stadium."

The new owners were also able to deftly market the attachments the fans had with the players. While the Red Sox, like all major sports franchises, had a succession of great players whom the fans embraced, the previous owners focused on marketing the team above the individual, especially in the era of free agency when star players are apt to leave town rather than spend their entire careers with a single team.

Lucchino, however, urged the marketing people to promote the players' personalities in an effort to give validation to the hero worship of the fans. Unlike the corporate, buttoned-down New York Yankees, the Red Sox are a rag-tag collection of iconoclasts with long hair, beards and personality quirks that management has encouraged rather than muted. Although they couldn't have planned for Johnny Damon to grow his hair long and become a local heartthrob, or Kevin Millar to create the "Cowboy Up" spirit in 2003, the owners didn't hesitate to embrace idiosyncrasies.

In addition, the Red Sox's fierce rivalry with the New York Yankees, especially in recent years, has been a boon to the brand outside New England. Some baseball fans view the Yankees as an overbearing bully, an image personified by Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. "We like winners in this country," Schmittlein says. "But against the backdrop of the Yankees, the Red Sox seemed more humble, and humbled -- a talented group that always came in second."

And in that lies some cause for concern, Schmittlein points out. If the Red Sox should win the World Series several years in a row, the brand would suffer potential damage nationally. Of course, Red Sox fans, even as they reveled in last year's World Series triumph, had few illusions about a dynasty like the one built by their local football counterpart, the New England Patriots. "What is most interesting about the Red Sox" is that, until their victory last year, "they came close but they didn't win," Schmittlein says. "If they were to perform in a dynastic fashion like the Patriots, it could well undermine the brand."

The Notorious Curse

Lest readers assume that the Red Sox brand phenomenon began with the new owners, it is important to understand that the brand is the product of more than a century of development. The franchise was born in 1901 but professional baseball has been played in Boston since 1871. When the Americans, later the Red Sox, began their inaugural season, they had a ready-made earnest following. The franchise quickly won over more Boston fans by charging less for tickets than its cross-town National League rival, the Braves, and when the Americans were playing the very first World Series in 1903 (they won), star pitcher Cy Young stood at the entrance to the ballpark, greeting fans and taking tickets.

Then, when owner John I. Taylor decided to build a stadium for the team in 1912, he located it in the Fens, a downtown neighborhood where there were saloons and shops, so that the team would become part of the fabric of the community. Between 1912 and 1918, the team endeared itself to Boston even further with four more World Series wins and the emergence of a young star named Babe Ruth. The unexpected slide that commenced in the 1920s -- when owner Harry Frazee sold not only Babe Ruth but most of the team's star players -- began a downward spiral that lasted into the next decade (and formed the basis for the notorious curse). The modern era began after Tom Yawkey, a young businessman, purchased the team in 1933 and slowly began to rebuild the franchise with the hope of restoring luster to the brand. By the 1940s, the brand's popularity was so deeply cemented in the community that in 1948, even with a pennant-winning team, the Boston Braves drew far fewer fans than the second-place Red Sox and chose to leave town rather than try to compete.

Pundits believe the 1967 season triggered the unparalleled level of passion that has only grown during the past four decades. That year, the team which had finished in ninth place the previous season won a dramatic pennant and fought valiantly in a seven-game World Series loss to St. Louis. The brand endured because the ownership continued to pour money into the product and fielded competitive quality teams nearly every season. Since 1976, the Red Sox have compiled the second best record of any team in baseball (other than the Yankees, of course), and since 1946, they have played in four dramatic World Series, losing all four in heartbreaking fashion before finally winning in 2004. More than anything, they perennially provided that key brand attribute: hope.

In addition, as the decades passed and new ballparks popped up around the major leagues, the Red Sox remained in Fenway Park, baseball's smallest venue but one that has become a signature feature of the brand. Martin Nolan, a former columnist for the *Boston Globe*, once wrote: "The ballpark is the star. A crazy quilt violation of city planning principles, an irregular pile of architecture, a menace to marketing consultants, Fenway Park works."

Larry Cancro, senior vice president of Fenway Affairs, has been with the Red Sox organization since 1985 and helped usher in the "Friendly Fenway" concept in the 1990s. He saw the marketing potential in the famed leftfield wall and trademarked The Green Monster into a brand of its own. He praises the new owners for promoting the power of the brand so well. "There are many levels of the organization now that communicate effectively with the public," Cancro says. "The fans feel there are people reaching out to them and that makes a big difference."

With a World Series championship banner now flying over Fenway, the biggest challenge for the team is to sustain the positive impact on the brand. According to Steinberg, this is an ongoing discussion in the front office where they have debated at length about empires and why they fall. "We have dissected this issue and talked about the Greeks and the Romans and the Blue Jays and the Orioles," Steinberg says. "We concluded that one word was the poison that destroys empires and that word is 'arrogance'. If you feel a sense of entitlement, that things will always be this way, and if you dare take fans for granted, you will fall fast and hard. We don't talk about marketing the brand but we do talk about the anti-arrogance police."

"Brands need to change and evolve over time," adds Reibstein. "But it is really important to keep a general foundation and know who the target customers are and what they value. The challenge for the Red Sox is to bring in new fans, and find new sources of revenue without alienating the

core of the old-time fans."

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