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Deserving Or Desperate?

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WNBA president Donna Orender often talks to women's basketball fans who want more coverage of the league, both in newspapers and on TV.

In April, Orender and major sports commissioners such as the NBA's David Stern met with officers of The Associated Press Sports Editors in New York. She asked how to get more coverage, and the sports editors said they listen to their readers.

"Wherever I go, invariably I have many fans who come up to me and say we want to read more and want to watch more," Orender said. "The newspapers say, 'We want to be responsive to what our readers want.' I'm just trying to marry the two up."

The WNBA set up a link on its website, inviting fans to send a form e-mail to the sports departments of the papers that cover their particular team, asking for more coverage. But the sports editors never suggested that approach.

"We welcome feedback from our readers, but organized e-mail campaigns are not the most effective way to influence our coverage," said New York Times sports editor Tom Jolly, who was at the meeting in April.

The Times, which does not have a beat writer covering the New York Liberty, had received one e-mail as of Thursday afternoon. The Courant, which has a beat writer covering the Connecticut Sun, received 12. The Sacramento Bee, which has a beat writer on the Sacramento Monarchs, received 25.

"I think it makes you cynical if you know it's an organized campaign by the league," said Bee sports editor Bill Bradley.

Courant sports editor Jeff Otterbein, who assigned this story, agreed.

"It is orchestrated. How do most people feel when they get a form letter or mass e-mail? In my opinion, turned off," Otterbein said. "It doesn't come from the heart."

Orender said the format wasn't important, just the result.

"You can argue form over substance, but somebody's registering a point of view," she said. "If you get those votes and choose to ignore them, that would run counter to the issue that you want to be responsive to your readers."

Some women's sports observers applauded the campaign as a good effort by the league to generate more coverage. Others thought the league appeared to be pleading.

"While I applaud the WNBA's efforts to motivate its fans, they're going about it in a foolhardy fashion," Kim Callahan, who runs WomensBasketballOnline.com, wrote in an e-mail. "My first thought was that it seemed embarrassingly desperate. You don't see this on the MLS site."

"No editor wants to receive 600 letters all saying the exact same thing, nor should editors that are already

providing good coverage be told they're not doing enough. The WNBA has provided a how-to in getting your letters deleted and creating ill will for the sport."

Pat Meiser, athletic director at the University of Hartford, understands how difficult it is to get media coverage for her teams in a state that embraces UConn men's and women's basketball. She says the WNBA's effort is sound.

"The issue is always one of the things that newspapers tell us on a regular basis - we respond to our constituency," Meiser said. "They'll say, 'If more people ask for coverage of the Hartford Hawks or the Connecticut Sun, then we'll respond to that.' That's the patented answer.

"It's a little overt, but yeah, if a thousand people bother to take a letter that's already formulated and send it, it should be meaningful to people who run the papers."

Meiser said groups such as the National Organization for Women and the Women's Sports Foundation often ask her to send form letters or e-mails to back particular causes.

"It's a common thing to lobby that way," she said. "I send them in. I think it would be nice if everyone would sit down and express their own opinion, but we live too busy a life to do that. I think there's value in making my little effort count. It says I care about this issue."

With the click of a team logo on the WNBA website, fans receive directions on how to send the e-mail. E-mails received by The Courant read: "As a passionate fan of the Connecticut Sun, I am writing to urge you to include more coverage of the WNBA. The WNBA is an important sport and I would love to read more about the Sun, players and entire league this season."

In her job as an ESPN reporter covering the WNBA, Rebecca Lobo scours newspaper websites an hour each day for information on different teams. Some are better than others at providing information. She would like to see more coverage.

"It can be frustrating if you're looking for a story on a team and all you can get is an AP report," she said. "I don't think there's anything wrong with [what the league is doing]. There's probably a lot of people who wish their local paper would cover it more and didn't ever think they could send a e-mail or letter. If it has the slightest bit of impact, if it gives the fans a voice. I think it's OK."

David M. Carter, executive director of USC's Sports Business Institute, said the campaign might backfire if a newspaper only gets a few e-mails and then believes their coverage (or lack thereof) is justified.

"The other part of it is that with massive e-mail campaigns, how do you know how legitimate they are?" he said. "It could be people signing in on 50 different e-mail addresses and it might be only one or two people.

"It might work. I don't know how effective it is."

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