



# HOW THE BOSTON RED SOX TOUCH ALL THE BRANDING BASES

*You need to win it all to create a powerful brand, right? Think again.  
This baseball team hasn't won it all since 1918, but fans keep coming back.*

BY GLENN RIFKIN

**I**N THE QUEST for marketing excellence, great brands are sometimes found in unexpected venues. A rock band — take the Grateful Dead, for example — can evolve into a strong brand much like Tide and Mercedes-Benz. The world of professional sports has spawned its share of long-running brands, from leagues such as the National Basketball Association to individual teams such as the New York Yankees. Often, branded franchises result from winning on a sustained basis; the Yankees' dominance of major league baseball has earned the pinstriped brand tremendous worldwide cachet.

Sometimes, however, a brand surfaces in sports without the help of championship trophies. Take the Boston Red Sox franchise, which has

become an enduring brand even though it has been unable to win a World Series since 1918, while the Yankees have captured 24 World Series championships in that time.

This modern version of a Greek tragedy has its upside. The Boston

team has become a great brand, not only in New England but around the country despite, or perhaps because of, the absence of ultimate glory. Time and again the team comes tantalizingly close to victory.

"Has there ever been an also-ran in history that's inspired as much sympathetic passion as the Red Sox? Maybe Robert E. Lee," writes Dan Riley, editor of "The Red Sox Reader," a collection of essays and articles about the team. Fans of the Chicago Cubs, a team with an even longer run of futile efforts, will claim this title as their own, and their arguments have merit. The Red Sox mystique seems to strike a deeper chord with a wider audience, though.

Setting aside its lack of championships, the Red Sox franchise has



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achieved both business success and tremendous brand loyalty by adapting insightful management strategies. Indeed, the franchise has so adroitly — both overtly and subtly — taken advantage of unparalleled fan loyalty that there are lessons to be learned for other sports franchises as well as

the far northern reaches of Maine down to southern Connecticut — an area dubbed “Red Sox Nation” — generations of fans have tracked the team with almost religious devotion.

“New England, to some extent, is a separate nation,” says renowned author John Updike. “The region feels

try, their devotion to the team remains intact and their enthusiasm brings in new customers when the Red Sox visit their city.

**The Red Sox franchise, like any true brand, has an indelible relationship with its “customers” — its fans. From the far northern reaches of Maine down to southern Connecticut — an area dubbed “Red Sox Nation” — generations of fans have tracked the team with almost religious devotion.**

brand-builders in a variety of consumer and service industries.

“Everything says it shouldn’t succeed,” says Deven Sharma, a partner and brand specialist with Booz-Allen & Hamilton, “but good brands are hard to kill, even if they are not carried by the functionality or product but by the emotional tie-in. That tie-in is so strong that people want to be around it because they feel connected to it and don’t want to give it up. It’s similar to what happened with New Coke. New Coke was a better product — all functional tests showed that people preferred it — but the emotional tie-in to old Coke was far too strong. You can’t underestimate an emotional relationship to a brand.”

**BIRTH OF A NATION, OF SORTS**

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very distinct and the Red Sox get the benefit of that local patriotism. Who else do we have to cheer for but the Red Sox?”

Handed down from one generation to the next, the stories about the team have become part of the literature and folklore of the region. Its tiny home, Fenway Park (Mr. Updike once called it “a lyric little bandbox of a ballpark”), and famed left-field wall known as the Green Monster take center stage. The current debate in Boston over whether to refurbish Fenway or build a new \$350 million park nearby in Fenway’s image is as intense as any political issue in Boston.

Virtually every New Englander has a tale of “that first trip to Fenway,” which is like a rite of passage in many families. Red Sox fans do not so much “go” to games as “make pilgrimages” to them. Even after New Englanders emigrate to other parts of the coun-

**RESPECT HISTORY, EXPECT EXCITEMENT**

Lawrence C. Cancro, vice president of sales and marketing for the Red Sox since 1985, says the brand is built upon several key elements:

- Boston was the first city to gain a foothold in professional sports in the 19th century. It is the only city to host professional baseball non-stop since 1871. The Red Sox franchise, which began in 1901, took full advantage of that nascent love of sports by building a stadium in the heart of the city’s neighborhoods and taverns, in the process creating a community of fans around the team.
- Thomas Yawkey, who bought the team in 1933, established a clear set of values that became the marketing foundation of the team: offer a competitive team playing in an inviting ballpark and make the total experience extremely positive so customers would return again and again. Well before brand-building became a marketing art form, he understood that you must stay true to the brand and love and respect the customer.
- Mr. Yawkey’s message was clear: Make Fenway Park the star, not individual players. The franchise has avoided building its brand on the backs of superstars, especially since free agency and skyrocketing player salaries have made it nearly

impossible to keep star players under contract for more than a few years.

- The Red Sox benefited greatly from becoming the favorite team of the literati, such as Mr. Updike, Stephen King, Doris Kearns Goodwin, John Cheever, David Halberstam and sportswriters including Peter Gammons, Bob Ryan and Charles Pierce. “Fenway has been a talisman for the poetically inclined,” wrote Martin F. Nolan in the *Boston Globe* in 1986. “It is old, it is idiosyncratic and a frequent citadel of dashed hopes — all enduring themes of literature.”
- The front office promises a competitive team but not necessarily a winner. The team’s mission statement pledges to maintain a championship-caliber team year in and year out, and though the big prize has been elusive, the team has long been successful on the field.
- Since the 1980’s, “Friendly Fenway” has attracted fans and nonfans by making the ballpark feel like a home away from home and by staging something larger than baseball games — entertaining events.
- Perhaps most important, the team knows and respects its customer base. Though cynics and talk-radio hosts might argue, the Red Sox have a strong understanding of what fans embrace about the brand. In a provincial region steeped in tradition, the team has not substantially changed its uniforms or logo in more than 60 years. Thought it has incorporated a video screen in center field and giant Coca-Cola bottles over the left field



wall, it has shunned the circus atmosphere of other arenas, preferring to let the game be the focus of attention.

Clearly, the formula has worked. In an era in which player salaries have drained most sports franchises, the Red Sox are consistently profitable (though as a private company, the team does not reveal exact numbers). Playing in baseball’s smallest ballpark (Fenway, built in 1912, seats 34,000, nearly 10,000 seats less than its nearest-sized competitors), the Red Sox consistently draw a 90-percent-capacity crowd of nearly 2.5 million fans each season. The franchise’s home attendance figures put it in sixth place

against franchises with new, much larger stadiums in cities such as Toronto, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago and Dallas. On the road, the Red Sox brand is just as powerful, with a draw of 2.5 million in 1998.

Such loyal fans have helped boost the sale of Red Sox merchandise — ranking in ninth place among all the baseball teams in 1999. It’s not breakout products that account for these sales, but simply the devotion of a loyal fan base — and the ability of a team to reach that market.

Stuart Layne, executive vice president of marketing for the Boston Celtics, served as marketing vice president for the Seattle Mariners

prior to switching sports five years ago. He says the Red Sox brand was a model he used as he tried to create a similar interest in Seattle.

“Even though the Red Sox didn’t have championship-caliber teams on a consistent basis, they consistently outdrew other teams coming in,” Mr. Layne says. “The Yankees and Red Sox outdrew everybody else. From a national perspective, the Red Sox are considered one of the great traditional teams in the country. Regionally, their pull is even greater.”

Part of the allure of the team is its consistent high level of play for the past 32 years. Since 1976, the Red Sox have compiled the second-best record in all of baseball (it is no surprise the Yankees are No. 1) and, in the past 81 years, they have played in four dramatic and memorable World Series contests: 1946, 1967, 1975 and 1986. In each one they lost in the seventh game; the 1986 defeat came when they were one strike away from the championship.

Therein lies the essence of the brand. To come tantalizingly close time and time again but to fall short is the Red Sox legacy. Though he wasn’t thinking as a marketer, Mr. Urdike neatly framed a key part of the Red Sox brand proposition when he wrote in the *Boston Globe* in 1986: “All men are mortal, and therefore all men are losers; our profoundest loyalty goes out to the fallible.”

“They’re the greatest ‘what if’ team in sports,” adds Mr. Riley, “and that’s what makes them baseball’s most amusing team. Their power to divert, bemuse, bewilder and absorb

lies in their ability to engage us long after the final out of any season.”

### **EVEN WITHOUT TELEVISION, A SUMMERTIME ADDICTION**

In an age when television changed the nature and economics of sports, the Red Sox brand, according to Stephen A. Greyser, a professor of marketing at the Harvard Business School, was built on three key factors: the team itself, Fenway Park and the tradition of baseball in New England. Prof. Greyser points out that while other top sports brands such as the Atlanta Braves and Dallas Cowboys achieved brand status due to a high level of national television exposure, the Red Sox brand emerged without that.

Unlike football and basketball, baseball has relied mostly on local television deals, and a franchise such as the Red Sox, which has such a hold on its regional market, thrives because of this. Professor Greyser, a longtime season-ticket holder, says the Red Sox “dominate the summer” in New England and the passion spills well into the off-season, regularly bumping other seasonal sports off the front page. This devotion is addictive, and because Boston is a city laden with colleges and universities, a steady influx of fans-to-be pours in each year. The students stay long enough to become ardent fans, then move to other parts of the country where they retain their devotion. This pollination far afield is what gives the Red Sox cachet as a brand, Prof. Greyser says.

“The real test of a sports brand is how much cachet it has outside its

geographic region,” he points out. “Teams like the Yankees or Green Bay Packers have it. Some get it for a while due to a string of championships, like the Chicago Bulls. Others will never have it.”

Jim Daly, editor of *Business 2.0*, an Internet business magazine based in San Francisco, is a perfect illustration. Mr. Daly grew up in New Jersey, attended college in Boston and stayed on for more than a decade. During that time, he embraced the Red Sox as his team and has carried that devotion out to the Bay Area.

“It’s different than in other cities,” he says. “The Red Sox have a funny way of getting inside your soul; maybe because they are such beautiful losers. When you go to Fenway, you feel the whole history of baseball unfolding around you. It harkens back to a time when baseball was romantic and poignant. I do see them when they come out to Oakland, but they are a lot more fun to watch in Fenway.”

As professional sports proliferate and new franchises spring up around the United States and Canada, the lust for such cachet draws attention to teams like the Red Sox. A rich history and tradition cannot be duplicated, but there are lessons to be learned.

### **PAST AS PROLOGUE**

As one of the original franchises in the American League, the Red Sox began business in 1901 as the Boston entry in the new league. Known as the Americans or Pilgrims, the team became a huge success quickly. It won two World Series (1903, 1904) and,

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# HOW MANCHESTER UNITED SCORES ON ITS BALANCE SHEET, TOO

BY ALAN COWELL

**T**hough the United States is arguably the largest cauldron of boiling sports brands, one of the most dynamic and long-standing marketing success stories in professional sports is in the United Kingdom. Manchester United, the famed soccer club, has achieved the kind of cachet that sports franchises the world over envy. The team has been a bellwether for British soccer for decades, and its success and fan devotion transcend the usual relationship between a team and its followers. As seen in this *New York Times* business article from July 29, 1999, Manchester United has scored big by leveraging its brand status into highly profitable business ventures around the globe.

LONDON — They were one goal down with less than three minutes to play and Manchester United seemed doomed. Then, magically, the fabled British soccer team scored twice to wrest victory from Germany's Bayern Munich for the European club championship.

That moment in Barcelona in May came after triumphs in the

two most prestigious competitions in England. But it also defined the central question confronting United, both as a soccer club and as the most successful player in the increasingly competitive world of soccer as big business: what do you do for an encore?

It is a question that preoccupies not just the team's investors and marketers, but the television company executives whose battles to broadcast Europe's elite soccer contests will likely rival the ferocity of players on the field, as digital technology intensifies competition for sports broadcasting rights.

Just Wednesday, Britain's Restrictive Practices court rejected a regulatory challenge to the current \$1.03 billion arrangement under which Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB holds exclusive live-broadcast rights to the 20-team Premier League, including United — much to BSkyB's relief. "It's a victory for common sense," said Vic Wakeling, head of Sky Sports.

For a team that earns 99 percent of its income in Britain, new sources of fame and fortune are just about anywhere in the world

where United's fans gather — from Asia to the Middle East, around television sets and even on the World Wide Web — to inject value into a fairy-tale brand of remarkable reach.

"Manchester United," said Vange Kourentis, head of the club's international marketing division, "is a brand of firsts. We are at the leading edge of football."

Deloitte and Touche, the accounting firm, has ranked Manchester United P.L.C. as the world's richest soccer club, generating sales last year of \$143 million, almost \$50 million ahead of its nearest rival, Barcelona in Spain.

BSkyB, the British pay-TV satellite broadcaster 40 percent owned by Murdoch's News Corp., covets Manchester United so much it tried to buy the club earlier this year. Its \$965.6 million takeover bid would have given the club access to a huge war chest for the acquisition of increasingly costly new players. It would also have given BSkyB a unique platform from which to negotiate rights to broadcast Manchester United games.

In April, though, regulators blocked the deal, arguing that ownership would have given BSKyB an unfair advantage in negotiating broadcast rights. The decision sent United's stock down 15 percent. And, even after the sporting triumphs one month later, the instant wisdom said that, as a business, United had nowhere left to go.

"It can't get any better," said a report in *The Guardian* newspaper in May that advised stock-holding readers to "sell the fairy tale."

The judgment reflected some basic uncertainties surrounding the business of soccer. In a game where success is notoriously fickle, how can the company behind the players wrest lasting value and market performance? Indeed, with the skyrocketing cost of buying players — United spent \$43.3 million on just three players last year and its total wages bill

increased by a further \$6.2 million to \$37.7 million — where will clubs find the money to remain competitive on the field and profitable on the balance sheet?

Since then, though, a new strategy has become increasingly apparent. Without a big-brother backer like BSKyB, United is seeking to exploit its well-known brand, pushing to transpose "The Theater of Dreams" — as its Old Trafford stadium in Manchester is known — into completely new arenas.

Just in the past few months, United managers have struck franchise deals with outlets in Singapore and Dubai to establish flagship stores where fans can buy team-branded merchandise, access United's Web site and watch its television station MUTV.

In such distant lands, said Mr. Kourentis, the international marketing chief, "those flagship stores will be their theater of

dreams and we will take as much as possible to the fans."

Indeed, when the squad embarked on a tour of Australia and China this month, virtually the entire senior management went along to evaluate market openings. The Thai language version of its *United Magazine* sells 20,000 copies a month. United reckons it already has 20 million television followers in China, and sees a potential 200 million satellite audience there.

At United's Megastore in Manchester the other day, the brand's reach was evident enough: Oh Aur Song, a 21-year-old student visiting from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, bought a United T-shirt. The reason: He watches Premier League games on satellite back home and United is his favorite team.

The thinking behind United's far-flung marketing is clear: The club's huge following outside

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under its new name of Red Sox, won four more between 1912 and 1918.

Even without the drama of the World Series, and before the turn of the century, Boston had die-hard fans. Boston and baseball became synonymous when the city hosted its first professional baseball team in 1871. Rounders, an early version of baseball, was played before enthusiastic

crowds on the Boston Common early in the 19th century.

Even the earliest Boston baseball franchise, the National League's Boston Red Stockings (later the Braves), recognized the value of building and ingratiating a fan base. In the days before radio and television, the local teams situated themselves within the Boston neighborhoods, the playing fields nestled between home

and work for prospective fans. The original Braves ballpark was on Huntington Avenue near the saloons and taverns, like the popular Third Base Saloon at the corner of Ruggles and Tremont Streets in Boston. "They put themselves in the center of the community, which was really brilliant marketing," Mr. Cancro says.

The Red Sox's owner, John I. Taylor, whose family also owned the

Britain offers a mother lode of merchandising that has yet to be tapped commercially.

"There's still scope for considerably more. It's such a wonderful brand in many countries in western and eastern Europe, the Far East and areas such as that," said Nigel Hawkins, an analyst with Williams de Broe brokerage in London.

(Oddly, the United States does not figure in any of United's plans for expansion. The reason, said Mr. Kourentis, is that, while soccer has an increasingly keen following among American teenagers, baseball and American football are simply too popular to permit soccer to reach a wider audience.)

Neither is the globe itself the limit. On July 15, United announced the launch of a free Internet service called ManU-Free.net to take the brand into cyberspace and, presumably,

e-commerce. The launch pushed up its stock by 1.5 percent to 225 pence, defying the doomsayers who said it had peaked a few months earlier at 218.

The club is not neglecting the fans at home, either. United has announced a \$46.5 million plan to expand the seating capacity of the Theater of Dreams from 55,000 to 67,400. The expansion is not surprising. Last year, United's gate receipts earned the biggest proportion of its sales at 34 percent, followed by merchandising at 33 percent.

Of course, United's existing merchandising is already the envy of other clubs. At the Megastore in Manchester, shoppers can buy everything from United-brand wallpaper at \$10.80 a roll to hi-fis at \$139 each. And shoppers don't just end their spending in the store.

Just the other day, for instance, David and Lesley Gray

from Dumfries, Scotland, took a two-and-a-half-hour train ride south to the Theater of Dreams, with their sons Paul, 7, and Ross, 4. For an hour, the 44-year-old Scottish police officer and his family shopped at United's Megastore, dropping around \$400 on branded towels, boxer shorts, posters, T-shirts and replica red and white uniforms for their sons, who craved United jerseys emblazoned with the name of their hero, midfield superstar David Beckham.

Then they went back to their room at the United-themed 111-room Quality Hotel (two-night family special: \$320) and planned their meals at the Red Cafè, as United's branded eatery here is known (budgeted outlay: \$130). And, two days later, they went home, their hearts full and their wallets \$1,000 lighter. "It was a treat for the kids," Gray said, slightly defensively. 

Boston Globe, decided to build a new ballpark for the team in 1912. He specifically chose the Fens neighborhood for construction because he owned blocks of real estate there and wanted to attract customers. To keep the focus on his main business interest, he named it Fenway Park.

Though the National League predated the American League, the local baseball fans found the National

League arrogant and undisciplined. Once the American League was formed, the rivalry grew fierce. National League teams routinely raided other teams for players and charged fans twice as much for admission. Early on, local allegiance shifted to the Red Sox and never wavered. So great was the love for the Red Sox that in 1948, when the Braves won the pennant, they still drew far fewer fans

than the Red Sox, who finished second in their league. Eventually the Braves moved to Milwaukee.

### RENOVATING FENWAY, THE FIRST TIME

The 1920's and early 1930's were dismal for the Red Sox, and fan interest dropped dramatically. In 1932, the team posted a pitiful 43-111 record and drew under 200,000 fans. The



following year, 30-year old Tom Yawkey, who had inherited a timber and mining fortune, bought the team and initiated a million-dollar renovation of Fenway Park, which included the construction of the infamous left field wall. In Depression-ridden Boston, he won hearts by using union labor and paying cash. He opened his wallet further and brought in high-priced stars such as Lefty Grove, Jimmie Foxx and Joe Cronin. "He wanted a team the locals could be proud of," Mr. Cancro says. "His mantra was 'come out to Fenway Park and have a good time.'"

He painted the ballpark a unique shade of green to heighten the ambiance and give it an inviting personality. It embodied the heart of the team, Mr. Cancro points out. In Fenway, the Red Sox had a venue that would emerge as the core equity of the brand. "Venues are crucial to cre-

ation of a brand," Prof. Greyser says, "and in the era of free agency, where you can slide downhill fast, the brand has to transcend that. Fenway Park helps the Red Sox brand do that."

"The ballpark is the star," wrote Mr. Nolan of the Boston Globe. "A crazy-quilt violation of city planning principles, an irregular pile of architecture, a menace to marketing consultants, Fenway Park works."

Though Mr. Yawkey put the pieces in place throughout the 1930's, 40's, 50's and early 60's, a close look at those decades shows a spotty relationship with customers at best. Attendance fluctuated between 1.5 million in the late 1940's when the team was a perennial contender to a low of 650,000 in 1966, when the team finished ninth in a 10-team league. Far from his crown jewel, Mr. Yawkey began to think of Fenway Park as too small and too uncomfortable for fans

and considered building a new park.

Most believe the cult-like worship of the Red Sox began during the 1967 "Impossible Dream" season. That was the year that the team, which had finished in ninth place the previous season, battled down to the wire and won one of the great pennant races of all time. Although the team lost an epic seven-game World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals, the season unleashed a wellspring of excitement and devotion that has hardly waned in the past 32 years.

"I don't know of another sports franchise where there is such a clear line of demarcation," says Bob Ryan, a veteran sportswriter for the Boston Globe. "It is totally divided, in the business sense and the marketing of the charm and romance of Fenway Park, between pre-1967 and post-1967. Before 1967, Fenway was the old forgotten sofa in grandma's attic. After 1967, it became a cherished antique."

Behind Carl Yazstremski's heroic Triple Crown performance, the Red Sox put a Yankee-like product on the field for the first time in a generation, and it stirred the fires of New England fans like nothing had before. During the next three decades, attendance continued to rise to 2 million and above, and has maintained a steady level ever since.

#### **PROMISE LITTLE, DELIVER A LOT**

"Even though we get trashed in the media for not winning the World Series, we will over-deliver when fans come here," Mr. Cancro says. "While you are watching the team try hard,

every other part of the experience will be high. You can't be a loser in other ways, like offering warm beer and cold hot dogs."

Under his "Friendly Fenway" program, Mr. Cancro has raised the level of brand awareness throughout the organization. He knows, for example, that many of the people that customers encounter at the park — such as those selling at concession stands — do not work for the Red Sox but for Aramark, the Philadelphia-based corporation that handles sports concessions and merchandising. But to fans, all experiences at Fenway reflect on the team and the brand, so he has pushed hard to instill the "Friendly Fenway" theme to all vendors. "We tell groups that they can come here and turn their backs to the field and still have fun," Mr. Cancro says. Under the program, the Red Sox installed a glass-enclosed "600 Club" where fans could dine and watch the game in air-conditioned comfort, improved and diversified food services and other concessions, and created a Web site where fans can purchase tickets, get directions, have chats with the team's general manager and find other dynamic ways to interact with the brand.

Mr. Cancro is also keenly aware that the economics of baseball have changed and that teams with the biggest war chests for the best talent will be the most competitive. He is also aware of the unusual brand value of Fenway and its quirky charm. The big left field wall, The Green Monster, is "a core of the franchise." The team has trademarked The Green Monster

name and even created a colorful mascot that interacts with children but stays off the field. "The first thing kids do when we take them out on the field is run out to touch the Wall," Mr. Cancro says.

What the Red Sox have managed to do adroitly is keep the focus on the team and ballpark, not individual players. Though the local media made much of the controversial departures of superstar players such as Roger Clemens and Mo Vaughn, attendance figures and fan interest never dropped. "The fans are coming out to see the Red Sox, not individual players," Mr. Cancro says. "Some people fall in love with a player but eventually, they come around. After all these years, it's not about any single player, no matter who they are. You can't recreate Babe Ruth just by hitting home runs."

Case in point: When Mr. Vaughn, a hugely popular former league M.V.P., left the team and signed with the Anaheim Angels before the 1999 season after a public contract dispute, the media raked the front office over the coals. The team was hopeless, according to the pundits and talk-radio hosts. But quietly, during the same time period, the fans bought more advance purchase tickets than the team had ever sold. Despite the horror of Mr. Vaughn's departure, the fans reinforced the team's belief that the team, not any individual player, is the product.

So while Red Sox management puts stars such as Nomar Garciaparra and Pedro Martinez on the covers of its media guide and fan magazines, it

doesn't tie its marketing campaigns to them.

### STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

As the franchise awaits a new ballpark to allow for increased revenue growth, the marketing people have had to find ways to stay ahead of the curve. The Red Sox were the first team to fully embrace technology. They were first to offer tickets ordered on a touch-tone phone, and the first to post a Web site. The pent-up demand for Internet access was so high that on the day the site was posted unannounced for a 30-hour test, the team sold more than 10,000 tickets online.

"Understanding our customers and how they behave; we've been excellent at that for a century," Mr. Cancro says. "Marketing at its best is when people don't know they've been marketed to."

With 20 percent of its fans attending from outside New England, Fenway Park has become the No. 1 tourist destination in Massachusetts, but the team's core customers come first. With a product as idiosyncratic as a baseball team, where the key players can be injured, be traded or underperform at unexpected moments, the most difficult job of the marketers is to continually deliver on the value proposition.

"We only promise something we can deliver and do deliver," Mr. Cancro says. "When you break your promise with your fans, that's when you get in trouble." 

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