

With the season starting tomorrow, I wanted to update a blog post I did in 2010. In just the past 18 months the number of proposals for in-game entertainment have skyrocketed. It seems like every day I get a new proposal to invest in a company that is going to revolutionize the experience of going to a sporting event. Without fail the proposal starts out with some form of "with the explosion in sales of smartphones..." Then I get the meat of the pitch which is some derivative of stats, pictures, fantasy games, social sharing via FB/Twitter or some new network to replace FB/Twitter.

No thank you. Not for the Dallas Mavericks.

In order to understand why I hate these proposals you have to understand first what the Mavs sell, which is not basketball, the expectation of our consumers the available downtime at a Mavs or any NBA game.

Think back to the first professional sporting event you ever went to. It was probably a parent taking you to the game. What do you remember ? Do you remember the score ? A home run ? A jump shot ? A pass play ? Or do you remember who you were with ? I remember being with my dad at a Pirates game. My dad and my uncle at a Steelers game. Think about your fondest memories at a sporting event. Again, what do you remember ? Hanging with your buddies ? A first date ? A last date ? How you felt after the team won or loss ? A business partner or customer ? Or the score ? I'm guessing its not the score.

We in the sports business don't sell the game, we sell unique, emotional experiences. We are not in the business of selling basketball. We are in the business of selling fun. We are in the business of letting you escape. We are in the business of giving you a chance to create shared experiences. I say it to our people at the Mavs at all time, I want a Mavs game to be more like a great wedding than anything else.

You know the wedding I'm talking about. The one where everyone is up dancing, smiling , cheering, laughing. The one where Grandma Ethel has her annual vodka gimlet and is trying to do the Dougie. The one where although you have no earthly idea what the Dougie is, you can't say no to your 12 year old niece. The one where the whole place does the Macarena while laughing so hard they are crying. The one where everyone sings out loud to every song and you hug the cousin you haven't seen in 10 years and hope you don't see for another 10. It doesn't matter if half the room doesn't believe the couple will still be married at the end of the year. It matters if everyone in the place is having a great time. It matters if its the type of wedding that everyone in the room wished or wishes their wedding was or will be like this one. It matters that you leave the reception and your hands hurt from clapping , your mouth hurts from smiling so much and your throat is sore because you were laughing , singing and hollering so much. That's a great wedding.

That's how I want a Mavs game to be.

I want it to be very participatory. I want it to be very social. I want it to be very inclusive. I want it to be memorable. I want it to be so much fun people talk about it to their friends and can't wait to go back. I want every parent to get tears in their eyes when they see their kids jumping up and down whether the score is 2 to 0. or 120 to 84. When they are chanting Lets Go Mavs . When they are dancing and trying to get on the jumbotron.

I want the guy on the date knowing that the longest he will have to talk is during halftime and then after the game, and until the next date, he can talk about the game itself and not have all the pressure of trying to think of something to say while his date can be relieved that she can enjoy the game without him talking. Or vice versa of course. I want everyone coming to a Mavs game to be able to find their own personal attachment to that night. I know I can't control what happens on the court every game, but I can do my very best to make sure that no matter what the score, we have done all we can to make the fan experience like a great wedding.

IMHO, that means eliminating as many of the "look down" moments in the game as I possibly can. Once you sit in your seat, the only time I want you to look down is to pick up the soda or beer you set down under your seat and maybe to check your phone to see if you got a text from the sitter or your buddy about where to meet after the game.

I want you always looking up. Looking at the game and the entertainment in the arena. You can't cheer if you aren't watching. It's my job to give you something other than the game to look up at.

It may be looking at the fun videos we put on the big screen to entertain you.

We are going to try everything and anything we can think of to make it fun and memorable. Just as a DJ responds to the energy and attitude at a Wedding in realtime and tries to choose the right song or activity to keep the fun and energy up, we try to do the same thing at a Mavs game. We recognize that what makes our games unique is that like a wedding, Grandma Ethel can be sitting next to a goth looking 16 year old she has never met before, and if both are watching when the Mavs hit a shot right as the 24 second buzzer sounds, they can high 5 each other like they are best friends. That if Grandma Ethel is chanting defense and being a key 6th man for her Mavs, the 16 year old will feel better about cupping his black nailed hands together to do the same. That if we put a fun video up on the big screen, they both might just sing along

Video and music are two simple components of what we do. We are developing games that our fans can participate in at the arena that hopefully engage them with what is happening on the court. We are coming up with ways to reward our fans for being our "6th man" and adding energy to the arena. (I will save those for another post). We are looking for ways to enhance the emotional attachments created at our game.

I can't think of a bigger mistake then trying to integrate smartphones just because you can. The last thing I want is someone looking down at their phone to see a replay. The last thing I want is someone thinking that its a good idea to disconnect from the unique elements of a game to look at replays or update their fantasy standings or concentrate on trying to predict what will happen next in the game. There is a huge value to everyone collectively holding their breath during a replay, or responding to a great play or a missed call and then spontaneously reacting to what they see. You lose that if people are looking down at their handhelds. The fan experience is about looking up, not looking down. If you let them look down, they might as well stay at home, the screen is always going to be better there.

Thats not to say that smartphones don't have a place in other sports. There is enough downtime in baseball and football games that it helps to offer time wasters. During huddles and change of possessions, I can see a reason to offer look down entertainment. The same between innings, maybe even between batters. The NBA doesn't have those time sucks.

As in every business you have to always ask yourself what your product is and the best way to deliver it. In the NBA our product is fun and energy. The last thing we need to do is encourage our customers to stare at their phones