



UNIT 1 – CASE STUDY

Bill Veeck – Baseball's Marketing Maverick



Name _____

Class Period _____

**** Industry Pioneers: A SEM Case Study ****

Few have done for baseball and the field of sports marketing than William Louis (Bill) Veeck Jr. His father owned the Chicago Cubs in the early 1900s, and young Bill was weaned on the game. As the owner of three different teams, Veeck believed that fans should have a good time at the ballpark whether the team played well or not. Many of his innovations commonly enhance the fan experience today, including Fan Appreciation Day, electronic scoreboards, names on the backs of uniforms, fireworks nights, promotional giveaways, and expanded ballpark concessions menus.

As a driving force in the business aspect of the sports industry, Veeck's reach consistently extended beyond the simple sports marketing promotion. As owner of the Cleveland Indians in 1947, he signed Larry Doby, the first black player in the American League, only a few months after Jackie Robinson broke the MLB color barrier with the Dodgers. The next year, Doby helped lead the Indians to the only World Series championship they've won since 1920. That team drew over 2,620,627 million fans, an attendance figure the franchise wouldn't match until 1995.

His boldest, most controversial maneuvers came after he purchased the lowly St. Louis Browns in 1951. He quickly sensed the need to overcome the weakness of the team through marketing, noting that, "After a month or so in St. Louis, we were looking around desperately for a way to draw a few people into the ball park, it being perfectly clear by that time that the ball club wasn't going to do it unaided."

He once sent 3'7" Eddie Gaedel to the plate as a pinch hitter. He mused, "What can I do, I asked myself, that is so spectacular that no one will be able to say he had seen it before? The answer was perfectly obvious. I would send a midget up to bat." Not surprisingly, Gaedel, the only player whose uniform number was a fraction (he wore Number 1/8), walked. Veeck also staged "Grandstand Manager's Day," where fans made decisions about such strategies as bunting, putting on the hit and run, and changing pitchers by holding up signs that said "Yes" on one side and "No" on the other. The Browns won, 5-3. The fans' winning percentage of 1.000 was considerably better than the 51-102 the team compiled the rest of the season.

Not all was fun and games, however, for Veeck. One of his zany promotions didn't end so well and went down in sports marketing infamy. As owner of the 1979 Chicago White Sox, he permitted --though wasn't primarily responsible for-- "Disco Demolition Night." (Veeck's son Mike, a legend in his own right, reportedly came up the promotion.) On July 12, between games of a two-night doubleheader, a local disc jockey blew up disco records in center field, damaging the playing surface. Many in the capacity crowd rioted, and the second game had to be forfeited.



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Veeck was as reviled by most of the "baseball establishment," as he was beloved by his teams' fans and players. To say that he was often at odds with his fellow owners (or, as he called them, the "forward-looking fossils who run the game") would be an understatement. One of his most famous quotes is that, "baseball must be a great game, because the owners haven't been able to kill it." As if his promotional antics didn't anger them enough, his testimony on behalf of Curt Flood angered fellow owners more. The groundbreaking suit against MLB's reserve clause led to the establishment of free agency for baseball players, and has forever changed the face of the game – and the game's salary levels.

His anti-establishment activities weren't limited to baseball. Veeck was a strong civil rights advocate in an era where that wasn't the most popular thing to be. He participated (on his wooden leg) in the Selma, Alabama protest marches, and met often with civil rights leaders.

He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1991. The last words on his HOF plaque sum up his approach to sports marketing: "A Champion of the Little Guy."

**** Case Study Questions ****

1. What qualities did Veeck have that made him successful as a sports marketer?
2. How did Veeck combine "sports," "entertainment," and "marketing"?
3. Why would other owners and baseball executives have not supported Veeck's unconventional approach to marketing and promotions?
4. How would you assess his contributions to 1) Major League Baseball; and 2) the field of sports and entertainment marketing?
5. Would you want someone like Bill Veeck to be the owner of your favorite professional sports team? Why or why not?

Sources:

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