

A GREAT BUSINESS CONCEPT -

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

Looking through the business plan for Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing, one can't avoid encountering the continual references to the company's "integrity". We won't bore you with any more than a few:

"SRL Boxing will increase consumer demand for boxing while returning respect and integrity to the sport"

"The Company believes it is the only player in the boxing industry solely dedicated and positioned to positively change the sport of boxing"

"SRL Boxing is dedicated to the integrity of the sport as strongly as it is to the business of the sport"

But since it sounds as if the company is attempting to leverage this with potential investors as another of its "unique selling propositions", I think it's fair to explore SRL Boxing's standards in this regard, don't you?

And keeping in mind that the company, in this ambitious business plan, intended "implementing innovative marketing and promotional methods never before seen in the sport", I can't help but wonder whether one of those promotional methods involved spreading the word of a blackout for the company's April 5 ESPN show from SUNY-Buffalo; a blackout that in fact did not exist from the beginning.

You may remember we did a column not too long ago about this.

I'll say one thing in Leonard's defense - I don't figure him to be the kind of guy who's sitting up in an office dreaming up deceitful and misleading ways to draw paying customers into live events.

As a result, that leaves us no one else to blame other than than Bjorn Rebney, president of SRL Boxing, and Michael "Full Of" Billoni, a PR man for "Team Mesi" who was simultaneously representing the "Buffalo Blast" promotion.

Billoni, who is rumored to have fudged attendance figures when he served as general manager of the Triple-A Buffalo Bisons baseball team, must have studied SRL's business plan rather diligently, because apparently he thought it might be a master stroke of "innovative marketing" to send out a press release stating, in effect, that unless you bought a ticket (prices \$20-\$100) for the April 5 show featuring local heavyweight Joe Mesi in the very, very suspect main event (as it turns out, against puffed-up Keith McKnight), you weren't seeing the show at all, because there was a blackout in effect for Buffalo and its environs.

A GREAT BUSINESS CONCEPT -

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

As we told you in the previous column, that's a NO-NO. We have been told by a promoter who has done ESPN shows in the recent past that there is a standard requirement that the event is offered to the entire ESPN "footprint" - meaning the unauthorized announcement of a blackout is prohibited, though Bob Yalen, the executive in charge of ESPN's boxing programming, asserts that "There is no clause (in the contract), but they should not announce one (a blackout) if there is none."

Indeed. And that was certainly the principle behind Tim Graham's April 5 story in the Buffalo News, where he cited that the SRL company had been advertising falsely about the status of the event, as a way of squeezing out ticket sales that might otherwise not have been there.

In response to Graham's story and our subsequent column, Rebney denied any wrongdoing whatsoever to the website BoxingTalk.net.

Having been caught pretty much red-handed, Rebney, who obviously catches on quickly, went into what can best be termed as "Standard Operating Procedure" for a boxing promoter, which is to say:

* He made the obligatory legal threat - "Let me say that our lawyers are considering taking legal action against the instigators of these rumors."

* He used the "jealousy defense" - "Everytime you have something that goes really good like this promotion did, there is always something or someone to try and pull it down."

* Then, he embellished his story, vehemently denying an accusation that, in fact, had never been made - "They are saying that we promoted this as a title fight, which is absolutely a bold face lie. We never advertised this fight as a championship fight....." (we'll get to this in a minute)

* And of course, no retaliation would be complete without the "power play" - Rebney tried to get Graham fired. No dice there.

But you can't blame a guy for trying, I guess. One rule that's always held true in boxing is that when you sell out a show in an area that NEVER sells out a show, you have a tendency, in the immediate aftermath, to think you can walk on water. It's the kind of arrogance that pervades the business, and inasmuch as the Buffalo News was SRL Boxing's "promotional partner" on this fight card, Rebney must have thought he was standing on some pretty solid ground.

As part of Rebney's education, I suspect that at this point he was introduced to two words that didn't seem to make it into the SRL Boxing business plan - "journalism" and "union".

According to SRL's head man, the announcements of a blackout had nothing at all to do with the level of ticket sales, which far surpassed anything Mesi had been able to do before in his hometown.

A GREAT BUSINESS CONCEPT -

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

Rebney - "We had originally talked to ESPN about having a blackout. When the campaign started the only thing that even mentioned the blackout was on the radio promotion. It was not in any of the print media at all. Then ESPN contacted us and told us that the blackout was not going to be possible and at this time the radio had only ran the promotion for three days. On top of that it was a full 5-1/2 weeks before the event. As soon as ESPN contacted us we pulled the radio promotion. At this point there were only 800 tickets sold, so for anyone to say that the success of this fight is due to the three-day radio promo is absurd."

That's what we call a lie of omission.

Nothing in the print media at all? I just happen to sitting here in front of the press release for that show (which I'd be happy to forward to any interested party), in addition to a story that ran March 31 in the Buffalo News that was NOT written by Tim Graham.

Let me take a DIRECT passage from the release, dated February 27 (indeed, less than five weeks before the show) -

"Mesi will headline a six-bout card. Mesi's opponent and the undercard will be announced by SRL Boxing and ESPN2 soon. The event will be held April 5 at UB's Alumni Arena with the first bell at 7:00 p.m. The fight will be televised live on ESPN2's Friday Night Fights. IT WILL BE BLACKED OUT IN THE BUFFALO REGION (I used the caps)."

At the bottom of the release, the contact names listed for the promotion - Mike Billoni and Bjorn Rebney.

Rebney inferred that the blackout news was just a misunderstanding, and that all "blackout promotion" had ended 5-1/2 weeks out from the show, yet according to this line from a story written by Buffalo News reporter Rodney McKissic on March 31 (five days before the show), the promotion was still perpetuating the blackout hoax:

"Because promoters are expecting a capacity crowd, a local blackout could be lifted before Friday, said Michael J. Billoni, the media liaison for Team Mesi and Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing, which is promoting the fight."

Hey - maybe these guys were in the April Fool's spirit. I can empathize (hahaha).

It is important to note that when confronted later by Graham, Billoni did not deny making the quote to McKissic, and McKissic affirms this with us as well.

"The story is just as I wrote it," says McKissic. "I interviewed Mike (Billoni) on March 29 and he told me about the 'blackout' which one of our reporters, Tim Graham, later found out to be not true."

McKissic adds that Billoni was the operative of SRL Boxing who was authorized to deal with the press - "Mike was the media contact for the Buffalo Blast project. I did meet someone from SRL Boxing but I forgot his name and, to be honest, I really didn't need

A GREAT BUSINESS CONCEPT -

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

him. In terms of what I needed for the event, Mike was the point man."

What is so interesting, and so bizarre, about this whole thing, is that McKissic penned a story on Leonard entitled "Leonard Aims for Honesty as Promoter", which appeared in the News on April 2 - after such time as Leonard's organization had done its continuous and systematic lying to the public.

This of course came in the midst of a PR campaign propagated by SRL Boxing and bought into by the Buffalo News (an acknowledged "promotional partner" in the event), in which my belief is that McKissic's editors took advantage of the fact that, prior to this event, he had not written a boxing story since 1988. Quite obviously, there was a reason McKissic was chosen to write most of the pre-fight features in lieu of Graham, one of the best boxing writers in the country. And this is no slight toward McKissic, an excellent reporter, but I don't think it would be unfair to say he might not have had enough recent experience with boxing to cast a critical eye toward what was happening.

Now let's get to another lie.

I don't know of anyone in the press who accused this promotion of trying to falsely peddle a title fight, so Rebney's own INTIMATION of that allegation is a lie in and of itself. Once again, a case of attempting to manufacture and manipulate a situation out of what can best be described as pure arrogance.

The Keith McKnight thing may be somewhat minor, but it's a lie nonetheless, followed up by yet another lie in the way of explanation. Rebney's rationale as to why his promotional materials falsely represented McKnight as a "WBF Intercontinental Heavyweight Champion" is that FightFax, the source that they referenced for McKnight's career record, had him listed that way. Not true. FightFax does not do those things. What FightFax does is list every fight for the boxer, and when appropriate, indicates when a title was at stake in a fight. It was clear that the last WBF fight McKnight won was almost three years ago.

I've got a novel idea, in retrospect - if there was any question about McKnight's status, why didn't they just bother to ask McKnight? MAYBE because McKnight told them the truth, or would have? According to the April 5 story by Graham, McKnight said "They're just using it to push ticket sales."

Why couldn't they have contacted the World Boxing Federation? Or more to the point, why DIDN'T they?

Or why didn't they ask their own matchmaker? Ron Katz, who makes the matches for SRL, knew full well that McKnight's last three fights were against notorious losers who had an average age of 44 and a composite record of 26-232-7. I don't care how bad the organization is, those fights are not title fights. I can almost guarantee you ESPN knew that as well. In fact, they had serious reservations about McKnight as an opponent because of his recent ring history.

A GREAT BUSINESS CONCEPT -

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

Yeah, I know - you're a fan and you're sitting there saying to yourself, "Gee, Sugar Ray Leonard was such a great fighter. He was so famous. How could anyone criticize him like this? All I care about is seeing a boxing show. What do I care about this?"

First of all, while we concede that this most likely has very little to do with any idea that might have had its genesis with Sugar Ray Leonard, the fact is that he fronts the company and his name is being used as leverage in marketing and promoting the company's shows. So he bears some responsibility.

Although the techniques are not something that are seen everyday, the overall pattern is not all that unusual - just another group of guys around a promotion who thought they could "sneak one by" in order to get those ticket sales really jumping. And figuring everyone was just too dumb to look. Surprise!

Think about it this way - as the average fan, how would you like for a promoter to tell you the only way you could see a fight was by ponying up \$24.95 for pay-per-view, when secretly it was available for viewing on basic cable the entire time? Wouldn't you feel lied to, and just a little bit ripped off? Unless you're being disingenuous about it, of course you would.

What you may NOT know about is that there IS some recourse. We'll talk about that in the next chapter.

fightpage@totalaction.com

Copyright 2002 Total Action Inc.