
Chapter Eleven

Because Great Cards are Hard to Find

I moved to Raleigh, North Carolina to work on advertising for SkyBox, a trading card manufacturer, at a mid sized independent agency called Rockett Burkhead Lewis & Winslow. With billings at the time around \$75 Million they were still big but not New York big. Was I nuts? As a hardheaded business decision, I guess It was a little crazy allowing my career to hinge on the success of collectible pieces of printed cardboard. Still, the category had seen increased advertising activity. Companies like Topps, Upper Deck and my client SkyBox (then known as Impel Marketing) were making trading cards a pretty hot segment. Imagine that.

The hobby of collecting trading cards started to get a lot of attention when the values of some rare cards started to attract attention of the general public. A Honus Wagner card (a tobacco insert actually) from the early 1900's sold for over \$400,000. Mickey Mantle's rookie card was going for more than \$60,000. Kids and collectors fueled further speculation. Hobby storeowners sprang up almost out of nowhere. More and more articles about trading cards were appearing in local newspapers. Trading card collector shows were everywhere. Baby-boomers fondly remembered owning baseball cards. People complained that their moms threw out their collections while cleaning out the attic. Others remember clothes-pinning the cards to their bicycles to generate a motorcycle sound as the spokes turned mint condition into worthless. The Topps '52 baseball card set attracted a lot of attention among collectors. An era of innocence. A time gone buy. A relative rarity but still obtainable - trading cards were a fun hobby.

Manufacturers of new trading cards started to play into the belief that new releases would have the same future appeal and increased value. Could a Ken Griffey Jr. be worth as much as a Mickey Mantle some day?

Impel Marketing (SkyBox) was formed as a side venture of the Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company of Durham, NC as a non-tobacco diversification. Initially they distributed trading cards through tobacco channels: Convenience stores, grocery chains etc. They moved into Licensing arrangements with the National Basketball Association to produce and distribute basketball cards. Eventually Impel changed their name to SkyBox and spun-off of Liggett & Myers completely. SkyBox had some notable successes. They were known for Basketball Cards, mostly (The NBA Hoops and Skybox brands). And, they practically invented the non-sports cards segment with cards featuring Super Heroes from the comic book worlds (or should I say Universe) from Marvel and D.C. Comics. SkyBox helped fuel the frenzy for collectible trading cards, even without a baseball card product of their own. (They were never able to convince Major League Baseball that the world needed another manufacture of Major League Baseball Cards.)

I thought it was pretty cool category and Raleigh, N.C. suited me just fine. My family was starting to appreciate the relative calm of the South. The moderate weather was also a plus. I was catching the wave of a trendy product category that was peaking. I rode this wave long enough to launch one of SkyBox's most successful products ever: The USA Basketball trading cards featuring the first ever appearances of NBA players in the Olympics in 1992.

License to steal.

Licensing is a legal agreement with the owner of an “intellectual property” for the rights to leverage the borrowed interest of that property. As with my earlier experience with the toy business the idea is to reduce the risk of producing a product. In the case of trading cards though, without a good license (subject matter) you have no product. So the biggest challenge facing a trading card manufacturer is securing licensing rights to intellectual property that will result in enough interest to generate sales.

The more popular the property, the higher the licensing fee is

likely to be. (And the more aggressive the lawyers negotiating the deal will be too.) In trading cards, the license is your license to print money. Needless to say, the negotiations and sales projections need to be in a delicate balance.

U.S.A. Basketball cards featured NBA athletes who were to compete in the Olympics, so the licensing agreements needed to be negotiated with both the NBA and the Olympics, right? Well, sort of. This was an unprecedented situation so it was a little fuzzy. SkyBox, after lots of deliberation the U.S. Olympic Committee and the NBA the cards were presented to the world.

SkyBox negotiated with Earvin “Magic” Johnson to be the company spokesperson. Magic was going to put SkyBox on the map. The basketball legend and well-loved star would help propel SkyBox sales of basketball and other collectible trading cards as the official spokesman, beginning with the USA Basketball Cards release.

Then “Magic” announced to a national and worldwide audience that he had the HIV virus that causes AIDS. SkyBox was the first company to sign Magic after this startling announcement. He went on to the ‘92 Olympics in Barcelona and led the USA Team to a gold medal. The agency produced a TV commercial with Magic displaying his own childlike joy in swapping trading cards with his real-life son, 11 year old Andre. The TV spot was “Magic.” Advertising Age Magazine’s advertising review columnist, Bob Garfield, gave the spot 3 1/2 stars out of 4. The cards sold well.

Here’s what columnist Bob Garfield had to say in his Ad Review in the June 1, 1992 issue of Advertising Age:

“...the paring of Magic and Andre - from Rockett Burkhead Lewis & Winslow is positively wonderful.”

“There’s no point reproducing the banter between father and son as they flash SkyBox cards to compare their preferred line ups for the Olympic Basketball squad. The dialogue overlaps in an Altmanish way, and the magic isn’t in the words so much as the attitude: playfully feigned mutual disrespect. The famous Johnson grin was passed to the next generation, and the

exchange couldn't be more charming.”

A few years later SkyBox was sold to Marvel Entertainment and merged with one of SkyBox's chief rivals, Fler. But in 1992 I had reached a career highpoint with that TV commercial. (Critical acclaim on a high-profile account.)