

Posted on Sat, Dec. 23, 2006

Game made sense for Bell

By BOB COX
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

It's not hard to figure out why Tostitos sponsors the Fiesta Bowl or Toyota the Gator Bowl. They expect the name recognition to sell their products.

So why is Bell Helicopter sponsoring tonight's Armed Forces Bowl in Fort Worth? It's not as if ordinary people are likely to rush out and buy a new helicopter.

Simple, Bell officials say, it's all about honoring U.S. military personnel who in many cases are putting their lives on the line almost daily.

And, as a side benefit, it's good public relations with Bell's biggest customer, or customers -- the armed forces.

"We didn't do it to sell helicopters," said P.D. Shabay, Bell's executive vice president for administration. "That's not where we put our advertising dollars. But it does help in building and maintaining relationships with the military services."

As early as 2003, Bell was approached by Fort Worth bowl organizers about sponsoring the inaugural game. Shabay says he dismissed the idea in about five minutes.

"There was no way of justifying putting our name on a bowl," said Shabay, or justifying the expense.

ESPN and Fort Worth bowl organizers have never publicly revealed the cost of a sponsorship, but published reports say that the price tag for even this lower rung of bowl games is upward of \$500,000.

When organizers approached Bell executives earlier this year, they altered their sales pitch. In a time when the country is at war, when hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women have been or are stationed overseas, often in hazardous conditions, organizers wanted to use the Fort Worth bowl to pay tribute to all of the members of the nation's all-volunteer armed forces and to military veterans.

"All of a sudden it was something that could be truly good for Bell," Shabay said.

Marketing experts say a bowl sponsorship, or some other high-dollar advertising and public-relations venture, is a way to build brand identity. It can be valuable even for companies that don't appeal to a wide consumer customer base.

"I think it can be an extremely smart investment," said Matt Pensinger, a vice president with Relay Sponsorship & Event Marketing in Chicago.

It's important to build ties to customers and potential customers outside the normal, direct business contacts. But Pensinger says he strongly urges clients to find some tangible way to measure results, other than good will.

PlainsCapital Corp. is largely a business bank but was new to the Fort Worth market when it sponsored the Fort Worth game in 2003 and 2004, the first two years. "We thought it would be a great way to build some brand awareness," said Steve Hambrick, president of PlainsCapital's Fort Worth banking group.

"We really feel like we got our money's worth out of it the first two years," Hambrick said. "When we pick up the phone and call a company in Fort Worth and say PlainsCapital Bank, people say I've heard of you before."

But after two years, PlainsCapital felt like that chunk of its advertising and promotion budget could be better spent elsewhere.

Bell might not sell any helicopters directly because of the bowl sponsorship, but one marketing consultant says company officials undoubtedly expect their customers -- the military and civilian Department of Defense officials -- to remember.

"It gives the decision-makers in the Pentagon, when they're looking for a supplier, it gives them a good feeling about Bell," said George Haley, director of the Center for International Industry Competitiveness at the University of New Haven in Connecticut.

Bell has strong ties to the modern military. Vietnam was the first helicopter war, and Bell helicopters, in particular, were ubiquitous.

The venerable Huey ferried troops into and out of battle zones, the pilots usually dodging enemy shells to pick up wounded soldiers from "hot" landing zones. Bell Cobra attack helicopters and gunship versions of the Huey provided close air support to troops fighting on the ground, laying down curtains of machine-gun and rocket fire on enemy positions.

The "whop, whop" sound of the two-bladed Bell rotor was an unmistakable and welcome sound to troops. Shabay said: "I don't know how many times over my career I've had veterans come up to me and say, 'When I heard the sound of your equipment, I knew I had a chance.'"

Bell will have two commercials that will air during the television broadcast.

The 30- and 60-second spots, created by TM Advertising in Irving, are titled "Yellow Ribbons." The spots conclude with the words "To all those who serve. Thank you," followed by Bell's logo on the screen.

Bell will have a static display of its military products adjacent to Amon Carter Stadium on game day, including a V-22 Osprey, the company's tilt-rotor aircraft that has long been the center of controversy. Military recruiters will be on hand at the display, dubbed Armed Forces Adventure.

Working with Give 2 the Troops, a national organization, Bell is setting up drop-off points at the pre-game pep rally and the military recruiters' station for donations of goods to be sent in care packages to military personnel overseas.

Free game tickets will be given to the first 1,000 people who donate.

A swearing-in ceremony will be held for new recruits, and Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England, a former General Dynamics and Lockheed Martin executive who lives in Fort Worth, will be honored at halftime.

"What we're getting out of this is exactly what I thought we'd get out of it," Shabay said. "We're getting accolades from every branch of the services thanking us for sponsoring it."

Bob Cox, 817-390-7723 rcox@star-telegram.com

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