



Shot clock ticks for sloganeers

Inside the NBA's merchandise machine

By Shira Springer
GLOBE STAFF

Celtics legend Bill Russell walked into a crowded corporate suite during Game 1 of the NBA Finals and turned heads. Then the ideas started flowing.

Inside the suite were key players with the NBA's vaunted merchandising team, and adidas, its official outfitter. They weren't there for the game, so much as to dream up the T-shirts that will capture the fancy — and cash — of the fans who will pour into the Garden for Game 2 tonight.

It is a high-stakes, high-profit operation built to race from mere notion to finished product in less than 48 hours. It goes by the name of "Code Blue," and Russell's arrival set off their brain-
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Adidas product managers Amy Desharnais and Mat LeMieux reviewed merchandising ideas on a Blackberry before Game 1.

Celtics coach is hopeful Pierce, Perkins will play in Game 2 tonight. Sports D1

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'It's organized chaos. Basically, we've been going nonstop since a few days before the Finals.'

MAURICE CHALONEC, president of RC Silk T-shirt manufacturer in South Boston

Shot clock ticking for NBA merchandisers

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storming way-back machine.

"The ghosts are back," one of them suggested as a slogan.

"How about 17 cigars?" said another, combining a vision of the Celtics long-desired 17th title with the image of Celtics patriarch Arnold "Red" Auerbach and his iconic victory smoke.

"Or how about 16 cigars with the 17th being lighted?"

With that, the Blackberries were unholstered, notes taken, e-mails blasted. The process would repeat throughout the night as the action on the court, signs in the stands, and commercials aired in the arena set the suite abuzz. Meanwhile, two graphic designers hit as many Garden-area sports bars as they could in search of catch phrases.

Anything is fair game — as long as it will sell.

While the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Hockey League all have "hot market" plans geared toward quick playoff merchandise turnaround, NBA Finals scheduling, particularly a two-day gap between Game 1 and Game 2 tonight, presents a unique opportunity. The NBA has just enough time to put new products in place from one game to the next. The storyline of the series and the mood of the fans could change dramatically after tonight, so the NBA cannot afford to wait until tomorrow.

Catching the playoff zeitgeist at a sprint is a pressurized affair.

"Our jobs are on the line with 'Code Blue,'" said Ken Thornby, director of NBA Merchandising for adidas.

Working with him is a team of executives, designers, and local printers with presses on standby for the next big thing. The number of people directly involved with "Code Blue" is roughly 20 with bases of operation in Canton, New York City, and Indianapolis.

"I don't think there's anybody better at assessing and capitalizing on the pulse of the marketplace than the NBA," said Dr. Bill Sutton, a sports marketing professor at the University of Central Florida who has consulted for all of the major American sports leagues. "The NBA is adept at situational marketing. It's what can I learn today that I can profit from tomorrow and how quickly can I turn it around."

With a dream Finals matchup between the Celtics and the Lakers, the stakes are higher than in years past. If the league catches a wave of fan interest, the sales numbers could be staggering. Adi-



Workers at RC Silk in South Boston printed the latest Celtic T-shirt designs, rushing to make sure the products reached shelves before Game 2. The freshly printed shirts received the hologram sticker that distinguishes official NBA merchandise.

das has already shipped more than 10,000 "Beat LA" shirts, and that's just the start.

Sales of Celtics merchandise at the NBA Store in New York City have already increased by triple digits since the start of the playoffs. The Garden pro shop had its best sales night in history during Game 1. When news reached the corporate suite during Game 1 that all styles of the "Beat LA" T-shirts had sold out, the focus was on new graphics to further capitalize on the slogan. Maybe an image of a Massachusetts license plate reading "Beat LA"

On a television in the back of the suite, a commercial generated another idea. It featured a split-screen with Larry Bird and Magic Johnson as part of the "There can only be one" campaign. There is talk of replicating the split-screen on a T-shirt.

"It's not brain surgery," said Christopher Arena, NBA vice president of apparel and sporting goods. "It's what is the culture of the team, what is the DNA. Fans should get it right away."

Past merges with present

It was Friday morning, less than 12 hours after Game 1 ended with a solid Celtics victory. Inside the "design lounge" at Reebok headquarters in Canton, where the adidas sports licensing division is based, the day's papers



Sales manager Brian Duffy (left) and designer Jon Yuska looked over potential designs inside Reebok's "design lounge."

were spread across a conference table, along with copies of Sports Illustrated from the 1980s. Brian Duffy, adidas's national NBA sales manager, and design director Jon Yuska reviewed mock-ups of new T-shirt designs posted on the wall.

There were fresh "Beat LA" designs, including one with the Celtics shamrock logo and another with the license plate. There was a Larry Bird-Magic Johnson split-screen T-shirt and a "Big Six" T-shirt with Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, and Ray Allen sharing the same bench as Bird, Kevin McHale, and Robert Parish. A series of early morning e-mails also put a phrase taken from the Globe

game coverage — "Miracle on Causeway Street" — into the mix.

"The designers probably hate every time I call because I'm a pain," said Duffy, who worked for the Celtics as a ball boy and locker room attendant for 13 years before joining adidas. "I'm always saying, 'We need this now.' But at the end of the year, I'll take them out to a nice dinner."

The mock-ups represent designs that have been approved by the adidas legal department and cleared by the NBA. The legal department ensures there is no trademark infringement, while the NBA checks graphics for authenticity and accuracy.

There was excitement in the design lounge about a graphic that blends past and present with Garnett, Bird, Johnson, and Kobe Bryant and the phrase "Anyone can be history. Great men write it," a take-off on a slogan appearing in a current Gatorade commercial featuring Garnett. Only a couple of hours earlier the T-shirt and the "Great men" phrasing was approved by the legal department and the NBA.

There was some thought of incorporating "Go Green" into a design, and perhaps "Don't Go Green" for the Los Angeles market. But trademark concerns have delayed the process. The same can be said about "Ubuntu," the South African word meaning unity that has been a season-long Celtics team mantra. It also happens to be the name of a software operating system.

"I'd be willing to bet the players would be cool with it on court," Thornby said, before learning of the possible trademark issue. "We could build that Code Blue, put it on a T-shirt, and offer it to the Celtics players."

Thornby had hoped to have the players wearing T-shirts with the word "Ubuntu" during pregame warm-ups tonight, and then offer them for sale to the public tomorrow. But then the legal issue popped up.

"There are a lot of hold-ups,"

said Duffy. "You wouldn't believe how many ideas we can't do. Your hit rate is probably about 20 percent."

Beyond trademark issues, there are a host of reasons that clever ideas are shelved. While everyone liked the cigar idea, it was decided overnight it would be best used if the Celtics actually win number 17. And sometimes the creative team simply doesn't hit the mark. When retailers don't place orders, the designs never make it to the printing press. During the 2008 playoffs, the slogans "Banner up," "Wicked Hoops," "Parquet Pride," and "Green 17" stalled in preproduction.

A "Drive for 17" T-shirt reached the shelves, but didn't sell as well as expected. The creative team constantly looks for input from local retailers about what fans want and what type of T-shirts have sold well to avoid flops.

"You have the superfan, the guy who supports one player and someone who just wants to commemorate the event," said Lisa Piken, the NBA's senior director of apparel and accessories. "We try to offer something for everyone."

A very fast turnaround

By Friday afternoon, workers at RC Silk in South Boston were silk-screening the first batch of "Beat LA" T-shirts with the new graphics. The freshly printed shirts passed through a dryer and received the hologram sticker that designates official NBA merchandise. They were sorted by size and prepared for shipment. Back in Canton, there was growing concern that area printers would run out of green T-shirts.

"It's organized chaos," said RC Silk's president, Maurice Chalonec. "Basically, we've been going nonstop since a few days before the Finals. They can't truck the T-shirts up here fast enough."

In Dover, N.H. yesterday, Rocky Coast, the printer, was mass producing the "Great men" T-shirt. Adidas received a few thousand orders for the item upon its initial offering to retailers. It had hit local shelves by yesterday afternoon.

Because of that swift success, the Code Blue team decided to delay the release of the Bird-Johnson split-screen piece until tomorrow, underscoring the NBA's ability to continually adjust midstream.

When asked whether he felt a sense of relief with the first batch of post-Game 1 products on the shelves, Duffy said: "Very little. The relief will come when the Finals are over. This is our time, here and now. It's just ongoing."

And it will start all over again tonight.