

A Series of Interviews with Today's Thought Leaders

The NFL Targets Kids

LEFLEIN: If you had to describe the NFL in three words how would you describe it?

RANKIN: We define the NFL's Brand Essence as *Intense, Meaningful* and *Unifying*. *Intensity* goes to the competitive nature of the sport, how one team lines up against another and every play counts. The NFL is *meaningful* in a number of ways, one of the most important is having a shorter season compared to other sports makes each week more of an 'event' for fans and something to look forward to. Lastly, there is no U.S. sport like the NFL that is able to *unify* fans together on a local, national, and even global level as well as we do. The Super Bowl is the ultimate testament to that.

LEFLEIN: Most recently the NFL has been using the "Believe in Now" tag line. Are you still using that in your communications?

RANKIN: It is slightly different than a tag line. Each year we come up with a different theme that's meant for the internal team to rally around and for several of our partners to adopt with their marketing plans. For the past season it was "Who Wants it More?" and for this coming year it's "Believe in Now". There's an entire video done behind it which is shared with teams and partners to utilize as well. We are literally working now on the one for the 2009-2010 season. It's a big initiative that includes input from a committee of people around the League.

your mark. At the NFL, they started an executive leadership program that really gives you the opportunity to figure out how to get to the next step.

LEFLEIN: Are you doing anything now to attract more women to the NFL?

RANKIN: From a fan standpoint, the NFL has more female fans than any other sport and the majority of marketing initiatives to increase the fan base are being done at the team level. Some teams conduct Football 101's, where they invite women to come to the stadium, meet the players, and explain the game. About 18 teams participate in the program, and more than 10,000 women attend each year.

LEFLEIN: What are your marketing initiatives this year?

RANKIN: Our biggest cause going forward is NFL Play 60, a platform that will focus on the health and wellness of young fans by encouraging them to be active for at least 60 minutes a day. It doesn't matter if they are playing football or jumping rope in the driveway, the goal is to stay active and be healthy. A number of the NFL players, who we consider to be some of the best athletes in the world, are part of the program and offer encouragement and motivation to kids.

LEFLEIN: By focusing on kids you're also getting the moms.

RANKIN: We definitely recognize that the kids market is a great one

An Interview with:



Alicia Z. Rankin
Director of Research
National Football League

Alicia Rankin joined the National Football League in October 2007 to oversee the research department and work closely with the marketing and sales teams. NFL football is the most popular sport in America with nearly 200 million fans and in her new role, she is responsible for understanding and increasing that fan base and strategically expanding the NFL brand into other growth opportunity businesses.

Prior to the NFL, she spent 7 years at ESPN overseeing all qualitative and quantitative research projects regarding ESPN, all its networks, and its brand extensions such as ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine. During her tenure there, she built the Consumer Insights department to provide strategic research across the entire company.

Prior to ESPN, Alicia worked at R.O.I. Research and Sponsorship Research International (SRI), two research companies specializing in sports sponsorship research. At both firms, she was responsible for conducting and managing the sponsorship research programs of such client accounts as NFL Properties and Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART). In the course of the last eighteen years, she has managed

LEFLEIN: So how would you describe the culture at the NFL? Again what three adjectives come to mind? (I can't get the moderator out of me).

RANKIN: Professional, Passionate and Progressive. Being at a League, the bar is automatically raised. We operate in a very professional environment, with high standards to maintain. It's also a place where employees are passionate about football, and on a day-to-day basis we all work at making it the best sports and entertainment brand. Finally, it's progressive because there's a continual moving forward of the brand and sport. It's also about being smart about where the next opportunities are.

LEFLEIN: I can't help but ask: As a woman in a traditionally male dominated industry, what obstacles do you face?

RANKIN: I definitely think sports is a male-dominated industry. I can't say that it's changed significantly in the past 10 years that I've been involved, but I do feel the NFL is better than most. Last year they promoted a number of women and they have processes in place to ensure continued development for all. Roger Goodell, the Commissioner of the NFL, started out as an intern at the League and he firmly believes that a good idea can come from anybody.

LEFLEIN: What would be your advice to other women who want to work in sports?

RANKIN: It's important to seek out both higher-level females and males in a company to better understand the paths they took and what the key learnings were along the way. You have to slowly make

that the kids market is a great one to be in and appealing to the child and parent is the best combination. We know from research that the majority of people become fans when they are younger. It happens in a number of different ways; sometimes it's playing the game, other times when you sit down and watch with your mom or dad on TV. The stories you hear tend to be something like, "Well, when I was five, I went to my first game."

LEFLEIN: How does the NFL manage to keep a strong brand image in the face of maverick and unruly player activity? You seem to be doing a much better job than other Leagues doing that.

RANKIN: We track not only people's perceptions of the image of NFL athletes but also athletes in general, and the research indicates that NFL athletes are seen in a more favorable light compared to other sports. It can definitely be a challenge at times in today's media environment, but I do agree that the NFL has made more progress in this area than others.

LEFLEIN: What actions have you taken as a League to counteract the negative publicity?

RANKIN: First, the Commissioner is cracking down a lot more on improper player behavior and handing out stiffer penalties. The league and teams have also strengthened their player development programs. In addition, we launched a very successful player image campaign last year that showcased the softer side of players off the field. Through research we were able to see a positive correlation of the ads on the enhanced perceptions of our players.

LEFLEIN: All the more so when you're targeting kids!

last eighteen years, she has managed market research studies and consulting engagements covering 26 different countries worldwide.

Alicia graduated from Lehigh University with a B.S. in Marketing with a concentration in market research and statistics. She is a member of the ARF, the AMA, CTAM, and Women in Cable Television (WICT). She and her husband and three daughters reside in New Jersey.

Barbara Leflein



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