

The One About The Squeeze

Sometimes in life, you make a move that is uncharacteristic but required.

I picked up the phone, dialed the number in trepidation, and asked for the president. The assistant on the other end said, "Please hold." There was a pregnant pause before the assistant returned and said, "I'm connecting you now."

The conversation was one I'll never forget. Why? First, let me offer a quick backstory.

In 2001, I started my career with The Coca-Cola Company (TCCC) in Montgomery, Alabama. My mission was to collaboratively develop annual business plans with our bottling partners, align on direction, enable marketplace execution, and lead marketing asset relationships.

Marketing assets are a fantastic way to connect with consumers and a source of pride for The Coke System (i.e., the Company and its bottling partners). The assets give Coca-Cola access where consumers make memories and develop an emotional connection with the brand. Think about the last game, concert, or amusement park you attended. More than likely, you drank a Coca-Cola product while enjoying the occasion.

For context, these are three things you should know about marketing assets.

Marketing assets are expensive. TCCC and its bottling partner typically split the investment. Hence, there was always a push to gain a return on the investment.

Marketing assets are hyper-competitive. Over time, TCCC accumulated many strategic marketing assets. I always heard that we had an *embarrassment of riches*. But that meant our primary competitor was forever eager to convert an asset from

red (i.e., Coke-owned) to blue (i.e., Pepsi-owned) when partnership agreements expired.

Marketing assets are exigent. Big word, I know. It means that business relationships *require attention*. Effective partnerships stem from being connected and creating mutually beneficial value. If the parties disconnect, one may take the other for granted, engagements become transactional, and the relationship will eventually erode.

Enter the #1 Marketing Asset

The University of Alabama was the number one marketing asset in the state of Alabama, and The Crimson Tide had a legendary partnership with Coca-Cola.

For example, Head Football Coach Bear Bryant used to drink Coca-Cola and eat Golden Flake potato chips during his weekly TV show. The ultimate product placement. And “Great Pair Says the Bear” was the ultimate product endorsement.

But after Coach Bryant retired and the University of Alabama Football program’s success moderated, so did the relationship between Coca-Cola and the UA Athletic Department.

A head coach carousel ensued with names like Perkins, Curry, Dubose, Franchione, Price^[1], and Shula. But no one could restore Alabama Football glory. The only exception was Gene Stallings, who rebuilt the program, regained national prominence, and won the 1992 National Football Championship.

Simultaneously, Pepsi slowly and quietly built relationships behind the scenes with the University of Alabama’s key stakeholders. And Pepsi improved its market share across the State of Alabama, making inroads with customers and consumers.

Everything changed slowly and then all at once. The tipping point came in 1998.

The Coca-Cola and UA pouring rights contract expired and went out to bid. Quite possibly the worst thing to happen to the current contract holder. It typically means that costs will rise, and it's a signal that relationships are fractured.

By the way, I bet you are wondering what's the big deal about pouring rights. They grant a supplier the right to provide beverages (fountain and bottled drinks) and marketing exclusivity in the sports venues.

Astonishingly, Pepsi won the pouring rights contract for 10 years. Even after all the history with Coke.

Then, Pepsi was shocked.

When they signed the pouring rights agreement, they assumed that the University would also award them the out-of-venue media and marketing rights.

Not so fast.

Coca-Cola held the out-of-venue media and marketing rights in a separate contract with Crimson Tide Sports Marketing. CTSM was responsible for all the game radio broadcasts and weekly coaches' TV shows. They purchased the media and marketing rights to advertise out-of-venue from UA and, in turn, sold them to sponsors like Coca-Cola.

The not-so-good news was that Coca-Cola was left hanging by a thread. Coke was out-manuevered by Pepsi to win the pouring rights.

But a circumstance of pure serendipity happened. The CTSM contract enabled Coke to maintain a relationship with UA and allowed our team to market the Coca-Cola and University of Alabama association.

We were still in the game.

But the marketing and media rights contract was about to

expire soon. We needed to think and act fast.

Earlier, I referenced UA as the number one marketing asset in the State of Alabama. Why? Consumers connected with the brand more than any other. If we could effectively market our association, it'd increase Coke's brand preference, translating into improved sales.

But how? We recognized that the CTSM contract was in jeopardy. It was up for renewal, and we knew Pepsi would pay anything to secure the contract.

Our job was to show UA how Coca-Cola creates value beyond just a big payment. We needed to flex our marketing muscle, which was our competitor's weakness.

A Bridge to the Future

In pre-strategy development meetings with UA, we discovered they were concerned about the next-generation Alabama fans. The football team's legacy was fading, and a nationwide survey found that Bear Bryant would all but be forgotten by the class of 2007. UA needed to establish relevance with younger consumers. We could help them do just that and build a bridge to the future.

Our team developed a comprehensive, four-pronged marketing approach to connect and recruit the next generation focusing on four levels: Statewide, the City of Tuscaloosa, the University of Alabama campus, and Gameday. Our campaign slogan was "Tide Tradition."

We presented the strategy and campaign to the UA Athletic Director, Assistant AD, and Head Football Coach. They loved it. They also wanted to see if we would execute it.

That's when the fun part began.

We implemented a statewide Fall Football promotion featuring the University of Alabama logos on Coca-Cola packaging and

point-of-sale material, invested in Tuscaloosa customer agreements and community interests, executed on-campus dining and vending programs, hired a campus ambassador, and activated “Coca-Cola Kickoff on the Quad,” an interactive gameday experience including inflatables, games and sampling.

The marketing strategy was successful. We literally changed the landscape. As a matter of fact, the plan was the first of its kind. It became the model for other College and University marketing activation nationwide.

One thing remained undone. The CTSM contract. While the renewal was verbally awarded to us, it wasn’t ever signed by the University. At any time, UA could have pulled the plug and awarded the media and marketing rights to Pepsi.

The Game-changer

A group of Coca-Cola executives, myself included, met with Dr. Robert Witt, the University of Alabama President. Our meeting agenda included sharing Coke’s successful marketing strategy and how our partnership benefited the University. We also wanted to explore Dr. Witt’s thoughts about the future and how we could help.

After an enthusiastic and productive conversation, Dr. Witt produced a 6-pk of LSU Football National Championship 8 oz glass bottles. He said the 6-pack was sent by LSU’s president, reminding Dr. Witt of LSU’s recent accomplishment. Dr. Witt paused and said, “I want to bring both of these back to the University of Alabama, a national football championship and Coca-Cola into Bryant-Denny stadium where it belongs.”

Then, Dr. Witt revealed a surprise. He said his nephew worked for Coca-Cola. “Who?” I asked. “He’s your campus ambassador and is having a wonderful experience. Thank you for all that you’re teaching him.” I had no idea we’d hired Dr. Witt’s nephew. Another moment of serendipity.

Dr. Witt concluded our conversation with an appreciation for the historic partnership between UA and Coca-Cola and what we were doing to build a bridge to the future. He looked at me and said, "If you ever need anything, just call."

We left the meeting not knowing how valuable his last statement would be.

Six months went by. I continued to press CTSM, the UA Assistant Athletic Director, and University General Counsel to sign the agreement. I ran into barriers and delays. It seemed as if some backroom deal with Pepsi was in the works. I felt responsible for securing the contract so we could all move on.^[2]

Then it hit me. Why not call Dr. Witt and take him up on his offer to help? I was aware of the political damage I might do by going over the heads of key stakeholders. But desperate times call for desperate measures. This move would be uncharacteristic of me but required. Time to take a risk.

Out of impulse, I picked up the phone, dialed the number in trepidation, and asked for Dr. Witt. The assistant on the other end said, "Please hold." There was a pregnant pause before the assistant returned and said, "I'm connecting you now."

"Hello, this is Bob Witt. How can I help you?"

I re-introduced myself and told Dr. Witt about our challenge with the contract signature delay. He said he understood and would call me back in 10 minutes.

Ten minutes seemed like an eternity. All kinds of thoughts rushed through my mind. Surely, I'd overstepped my boundaries and would aggravate my constituents. Bottling Partner leadership won't look kindly on my approach. University personnel will call for my replacement. I may be demoted or even fired. All unlikely, but those are the thoughts that went

through my head.

The phone rang. I picked it up and, with a frog in my throat, said, "Hello."

"Preston, Bob Witt again. I talked to the University General Counsel, the contract will be signed today, and final copies will be sent to you immediately."

I was dumbfounded.

I replied, "Terrific, and thanks for your help. I spent almost two years working to have the contract signed. It only took you 10 minutes."

What Dr. Witt said next always stuck with me. Wait for it...

"SOMETIMES YOU JUST GOTTA SQUEEZE THEM BY THE BALLS."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. He snickered as well. I thanked him for his help, and we hung up.

What a game-changer!

Dr. Witt accomplished what I couldn't in a matter of minutes. He had the authority to make something happen. Dr. Witt fulfilled his offer to help. He applied the pressure (i.e., squeezed) as required.

The signed contract arrived the next day. And I never faced any repercussions for going around the UA key stakeholders.

That was the last time I talked to Dr. Witt before moving to my next role. I'll always look back fondly on those times. Not only did the Coke team out-maneuver our competition and secure the media and marketing rights, but we also created a beachhead for a future team to eventually regain exclusive athletic venue pouring, campus dining / vending, and marketing rights in 2018.

What I Learned

Position matters. I've often said that influence is leadership without the crutch of authority. But influence has its limitations. While I'd established credibility and grown my influence with UA key stakeholders, I couldn't ever advance the UA marketing contract to the final signature on my own. No amount of influence I tried to exert mattered. Dr. Witt held the top position at the University of Alabama. He had the authority to make things happen with just one short phone call. A friend once said, "It's good to know the king." Dr. Witt's position mattered.

Persistence pays off. It took two years from receiving the verbal agreement to the day the contract was consummated. And it took another 15 years for Coke to restore its storied relationship with UA. The team's persistence paid off. If we didn't fight hard to create the beachhead for the next group to advance the relationship, the campus and city would have indeed turned blue. And Coke would have missed what the future held, Nick Saban and six National Football Championships.

Providence plays out. Looking back, I'm amazed at how circumstances unfolded during my years working with the University of Alabama. In the above article, I referred to providence as serendipity. But events like Coke retaining the marketing rights even though Pepsi thought they secured them or hiring Dr. Witt's relative as our campus ambassador without our knowledge of who he was weren't mere chance. I'm convinced there is a higher power at work engineering all circumstances. The hand of providence played out.

Visit my website to discover more lessons I learned in the marketplace trenches: prestonpoore.com

Cheers,

Preston

^[1] Mike Price was hired to replace Dennis Franchione for the 2003 season. He was quickly dismissed after a well-documented off-the-field incident. My only memory of Coach Price was when we held a Coca-Cola Fall Football sales rally in the Bryant-Denny Stadium locker room. Price was our guest speaker, and our intent for him was to inspire our local sales team. When it was time for him to address the crowd, he pulled out a Pepsi-Cola 20 oz bottle, threw it against the lockers, and yelled, "F**K Pepsi." We were in shock. Not the way to start a talk. Extremely unprofessional. I shook my head in disbelief and wondered what we were getting into. Needless to say, Coach Price didn't last very long.

^[2] Working with The University of Alabama was a personal passion of mine. When I was young, I watched Alabama football games with my dad. He always pointed out Bear Bryant on the sidelines and talked favorably about him. And most of my extended relatives lived in Alabama. When I moved to Alabama in 1989, I was told I needed to pick Alabama or Auburn (IYKYK). I picked Alabama. But most importantly, my bride went to The University of Alabama. We were season ticket holders and attended the 1992 National Championship game in New Orleans versus The University of Miami. I guess you could say I married "it" (i.e., a passion for all things UA). All of this before working with Coke and leading The University of Alabama relationship for a few years. It was an honor.