

National Mortgage News

Play ball! Rocket Mortgage, LoanDepot and more talk sports marketing

By Spencer Lee | April 15, 2022

With complicated procedures and large amounts of money involved in home lending, mortgage companies don't assume their marketing will get them a home run right off the bat.

Marketing for mortgage businesses is aimed at putting them in a winning position, and many lenders — from the corporate giants like Rocket Mortgage and LoanDepot to smaller local outfits — see plenty of opportunities to make a positive impression in the world of sports.

After establishing a new office in Pepperell, Massachusetts earlier this year, Tom Popson, branch manager and senior loan officer for Mortgage Network, signed on to sponsor the town's youth baseball and softball programs. Popson sees his support as an affordable investment, easily generating positive marketing and bringing his business good word-of-mouth. His sponsorship earns valuable name recognition and puts him at the top of people's mind, even if his new neighbors might not be seeking a mortgage.

"Why does McDonald's advertise?" he said. "I might not be hungry now, but I'm driving down the road, and I see McDonald's — because they're top of mind.

"I'm there to let people know that I am a Pepperell resident. I live here. I work here. I have an office here. And when the time comes when you're hungry — using the analogy of McDonald's — you think of me," Popson said.

The incentive for mortgage companies to increase brand name recognition via sponsorships goes all the way up to the multibillion-dollar world of big-time pro-



Anthony Hsieh announces LoanDepot as the exclusive naming rights partner for LoanDepot Park, home of the Miami Marlins, in Miami on March 31.

Mark Brown/Photographer: Mark Brown/Getty Images

fessional sports, and there are few places where they are more prevalent than Major League Baseball. As professional baseball begins its delayed season this year, the industry's presence is ubiquitous in ballparks, stadiums and MLB promotions.

LoanDepot, perhaps more than any other lender, has tried to tie its name to the sport. The Foothill Ranch, California-based lender inked a deal in 2021 to become the official mortgage provider of MLB, as well as the presenting sponsor of both the American League and National League Championship Series.

The mortgage connection to baseball goes far beyond loanDepot's league-level involvement, with several of the largest companies touting official team partner status in recent years. In addition to its connections with

MLB itself, loanDepot signed on to become the sponsor of the Miami Marlins, while Union Home Mortgage and Fairway Independent Mortgage teamed up with the Cleveland Guardians and Milwaukee Brewers, respectively. More recently, Rocket Mortgage inked a deal with the Detroit Tigers in March just before the season commenced to become its exclusive mortgage sponsor. All are following the lead of Guaranteed Rate, which has been a partner of the Chicago White Sox since 2016.

“The ascending interest in sport sponsorship by mortgage companies is related to their evolved marketplace,” said T. Bettina Cornwell, professor of marketing and academic director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon’s Lundquist College of Business, in an email to National Mortgage News.

Rocket Mortgage’s introduction of a start-to-finish online mortgage shopping experience in 2015 changed the rules of marketing for the home-loan business.

As mortgage lending began shifting from one-on-one meetings in local offices to an increasingly online experience, pressure to be part of the “evoked set,” or the set of brands that come to mind when one thinks of the product category,” turned marketing into a higher priority, Cornwell said.

“The expansion of online mortgage services, where the consumer initiates the lending process, makes top-of-mind brand awareness important. Sport sponsorship allows mortgage brands to become household names that come to mind easily,” she said.

The mortgage industry’s focus on sports reflects global marketing trends. In a 2020 report from Deloitte, researchers determined that \$65.8 billion was spent on sports sponsorships around the world in 2018, compared to \$37.9 billion in 2007. Much of the increase can be attributed to the expanded visibility and reach sponsor messages have today thanks to digital advancements and the social media boom. In addition to brand placement at baseball’s venues, MLB sponsors can find their names on multimedia digital outlets, such as MLB.com and MLB Network, not to mention TV broadcast partners and social media channels, where messages can easily be reposted by fans to reach millions.

Sponsors and advertisers are likely to find a highly receptive consumer when a sports fan tunes in, according to Casey Hurbis, chief marketing officer at Rocket Mortgage.

“When we see American consumers — when they watch sports and they’re passionate about sports — they’re also leaning in,” he said. Rocket Mortgage’s sponsorships include a deal with the National Football League as its official mortgage provider, a title the Detroit lender has held after coming to an agreement with the NFL in 2020.

The sway a team or sport has over fans provides a huge “captive” audience for Rocket with which to establish a brand-story connection.

“There’s really fun, contextual ways to showcase that partnership and leverage each other’s brand to tell not only a brand story, but also help drive and influence business outcomes,” Hurbis said.

Among its other sports partnerships, Rocket currently works with the PGA Tour as its official marketing partner and title sponsor of the association’s tournament stop in Detroit. It also maintains partnerships with the World Pro Ski Tour, 29 university football and basketball programs and four NFL teams, including Michigan State University and its hometown Detroit Lions.

Sponsorships of local teams can resonate deeply among residents, especially in college towns away from large metropolitan cities. Support for college sports, whose fan base can stretch across a large region and commands deep loyalty, helps drive home the sense that a business is invested in the area’s well-being.

“When you’re in a college town — in general — those colleges are one of the biggest employers. They’re really the main show in town,” said Kenny Hodges, CEO and president of Assurance Financial. His company has established business partnerships with the athletic departments at Louisiana State University, located in Assurance’s home base of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as well as with the University of Alabama, University of South Carolina and University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

The sponsorships also provide a natural link between a company and younger consumers ready to enter the workforce, who frequently settle near their alma mater. A lender’s association helps create top-of-mind awareness among them as they begin their careers and enter home-buying age.

“If you can get behind those types of schools, and show your support, we hope it means something to our customers and to our referral partners,” Hodges said.

Some fans might support a sponsor of their favorite team as a return favor as well, a move known as reciprocity marketing, Cornwell said. "The thinking is 'This brand supports our athletes, so I'll support this brand.'"

Reciprocity marketing can benefit local branches like Popson's. When approached by Pepperell's chamber of commerce, he readily accepted the opportunity to back the town's youth leagues. The sponsorship is a small amount to pay but can go a long way toward demonstrating his commitment to local residents. In addition to youth baseball and softball, Popson also agreed to a similar business sponsorship of the local figure skating club.

"It's really about being a member of the community but also supports the other efforts I'm doing to get the more direct approach of Realtors referring me," he said. "They can say, 'He's got an office here. He supports the community.'"

Mortgage marketing's reach has expanded even further to include events and sports with smaller fan bases, including those some would call niche. Chicago-based Guaranteed Rate jumped in to become the National Hockey League's official mortgage partner at the end of 2020 and also partners with U.S. Figure Skating and professional rugby, bass fishing and bowling leagues among others. Last summer, Ruoff Mortgage struck a deal with NASCAR, making it the racing organization's official mortgage provider, while earlier this year, an Eastern college hockey league's tournament caught the attention of Mortgage Network, which served as the corporate sponsor.

Lenders have not shied away from athletic events with a large participant component either, such as marathons and road races. But while many companies support running events, Union Home Mortgage, based in Strongsville, Ohio, went a step further when it agreed in 2021 to become the title sponsor of the nearby Cleveland Marathon, traditionally held in mid May.

Its title-sponsor status means Union Home's name and logo is ever-present on race materials, both before and during the event itself. "It's more of a big branding opportunity for us," said Ashley Ali, community engagement specialist at Union Home Mortgage Foundation.

"It's also a lot of partner engagement for our employees," she added. The marathon expo gathering in the days prior to the race gives local Ohio-based Union Home team members a chance to promote themselves on the ground at designated tents in the expo.

The build-up to a large sporting event like the Cleveland Marathon also presents opportunities to tap into contests and promotions that can generate a long list of leads, which are easily trackable over time. Since becoming an NFL sponsor, Rocket has used its Super Bowl Squares contest as a lead-generation tool in the ramp-up to the NFL's main event. Sweepstakes provide a great deal of data and are commonly employed by Union Home in many of its sponsorships, Ali said.

"We're able to collect all the data through that, then we do drip campaigns," she said. "We can track if we actually get mortgages or refinances, or whatever it is, through any of our sponsorships."

Sports-streaming, which some studies predict to quadruple by 2028, and the ongoing popularity of social media, should continue to open up expanded viewership and engagement and encourage the emergence of new leagues and events. As sports interest increases, mortgage companies are likely to continue to find fertile ground to plant themselves in front of loyal fans. Finding a way to put their names front and center is a fundamental part of being in the lending business, according to Hurbis.

"We know we're not selling a commodity, We're selling a very complex financial decision," he said. "And we want to make sure that through our marketing and advertising — certainly alongside with partnerships — we're also helping drive and increase not only awareness, but positive opinion."