

## **Whitey Ford and the Best Marketing Event Ever**

By Charles B. Wendel

Maybe not the best, but close. And joyful.

It was the fall of 1995, 40 years after the one and only time the Brooklyn Dodgers won a World Series. In fact while I don't remember that event, but some people of a certain age would say it was the greatest day in Brooklyn's history.

Manufacturers Hanover Bank, whom I consulted to when I was at McKinsey had combined with Chemical (now Chase). While the name changed, its Middle Market unit remained the leader in serving New York's mid-sized companies. In the pre-digital era foot power and personal relationships differentiated the bank from others. They also had close ties to baseball; if I remember correctly, Tom Seaver appeared in ads for them.

Time for a party to celebrate one of the greatest days in Brooklyn history. It should have come as no surprise that the marketing group at the bank, then headed by Andy Parton who now runs the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Long Island, helped come up with the most memorable event possible. They brought together dozens of former New York City big leaguers from the Giants, Dodgers, and Yankees of that era. Names that the mostly male business owners who attended the event had grown up rooting for and were excited to meet.

When I read of Whitey Ford's death last week, I was sure he had attended that dinner. Even more, I thought I had gotten his name on the baseball that the bank gave to each attendee as they signed in. I found it and despite it having faded a bit over the last 25 years it was recognizable. Bobby Thomson's of the NY Giants name was just below Whitey's.

Other Yankees: Bob Turley, Moose Skowron, Hank Bauer, Andy Carey.

Now, what I really cared about, the Brooklyn Dodgers: Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snider, Carl Erskine, Ralph Branca, Gene Hermanski, Joe Pignatano, and others.

This means nothing to most of the men and women reading this, but to a kid who had grown up in New York, during a time when three New York teams fought each other and baseball approached religion in the fervor it created, it was a big deal.

That night featured dinner with one or two ball players at each table of bank guests, some speeches and a charity auction. I remember bidding \$10,000 for a jacket signed by Duke Snider (probably a mix of over enthusiasm and too much wine) and being relieved when the bidding quickly went higher.

Andy told me afterwards something like, "People are not going to complain about a few basis points after an event like this." The event built loyalty and resulted in an emotion banks are not known for: joy. While this was a spectacular, once in a lifetime event, it was just one of the many tactics the bank used to differentiate itself with clients, to humanize the bank. They did

everything from delivering candy to clients at Valentine's Day to Pumpkins at Halloween, and a lot more.

A book I wrote about 20 years ago, *The Middle Market*, included a chapter about their approach some of which may now seem hokey, but the chapter also discussed their database management and telemarketing focus. Pre-digital Frank Lorenco, then head of the group, exploited technology. I remember a meeting in his office during which he swung around in his chair and showed me his ability to go on to his computer and review a specific relationship manager's calling effectiveness. He told me he would reach out directly to bankers who were not pulling their load to find out why and take remedial steps.

This mix of data and personal interaction occurred 25 years ago. Not all banks have that capability or the management willpower to do this today.

Even before the pandemic digital marketers have become predominate at many banks. Changes in the way in which customers buy and a bank's desire for increased efficiency are among the factors driving that change. And, of course, right now might be the worst time imaginable to contemplate an event like the Dodger celebration. A Zoom meeting ain't gonna cut it.

But, banks need to make sure they don't let the pandemic undercut the importance of the personal relationships that bankers continue to create. This too shall pass. It better.

The old Middle Market group of Manny Hanny and then Chemical had a distinct personality that emphasized hard work, customer service, going the extra mile, and, yes, fun. Few banks today have any personality, and most would never consider how to bring joy to a customer.