

## **7in7**

### **Nate Silverman**

Paula Beadle:

We've created the seven and seven series to ask thought leaders to share ideas and insights to support the sponsorship industry. And today I'm delighted to welcome Nate Silverman, the Senior VP of Corporate Partnerships and Social Responsibility for the three-time WNBA Champions, Seattle Storm. Nate, the Seattle Storm is at the center of sports sponsorship and social good. I am so proud to be a fan and I am thrilled to talk with you today.

Nate Silverman:

Thank you, Paula. It's great to be here. Thank you for inviting me on and hopefully we'll be able to get you to a game sometime soon.

Paula Beadle:

Yes, absolutely. Well, I'm looking forward to that and I think that's a great first question for me to ask. The season is scheduled to begin end of July, July 22nd. Am I right about that?

Nate Silverman:

We don't have a date quite yet from the league, but yes, we have announced that there will be a season. So we're all excited about that. We believe it's going to start mid to late July.

We hope to have a date on that soon. It'll be a 22 game, regular season followed by the standard playoff format that the WNBA operates.

Nate Silverman:

It's at a single site as we're calling it in Florida at IMG Academy, which is a high-end athletic training facility. There will be two courts running, one for the national games and one for the local games, 11 home games, 11 away games. Although there won't be fans. So don't know if the league's planted a pumping noise or something to differentiate, but see a very unique season.

Paula Beadle:

Yeah, that's great. And so, Nate, how have your sponsors responded to the reduced season?

Nate Silverman:

Paula it's interesting because this has been certainly coming in phases, and when the, the announcement first happened, it really started the genesis with the NBA and the NBA making a public announcement that they were going to postpone the season, suspend the season. The WNBA is a sister brand to the NBA, and so that we knew immediately would impact us directly. So, I think like all of us, we were in shock and our partners were in shock and everyone was thinking, you know, what does this mean for me?

Paula Beadle:

So, Nate, what specific actions have you taken over the last few months to build your relationships with partners?

Nate Silverman:

The first thing that I did was I reached out to counterparts and friends and colleagues across sports. So the unique situation that the WNBA had is we actually have a little bit of time prior to our season starting, right? Because this whole thing kicked off kind

of February, March timeframe. And our season typically starts in May. So, we had a couple of months, but it had a lot of friends in the NBA, Major League Soccer, both leagues had just started. So, I started with outreach to them, said, how are you handling this? What are you doing with your partners? I quickly realized a couple of themes.

Nate Silverman:

One, nobody has a playbook for this. This has never happened before. And so, everyone was acting kind of independently and uniquely as an organization. But one theme that really resonated with me was to lead with compassion and understanding. And so, we kind of put that at the center of our approach and certainly focused on the relationship, you know, for us it's about the long-term relationship and not a short-term monetary gain.

Nate Silverman:

And so that was our initial approach and we led with that with outreach. So, we work with our owners or CEO to come up with a very scripted communication initially because of the sensitivity of the situation. And then we started to do outreach through direct contact. You know, just continuing to maintain relationships.

Nate Silverman:

We had a lot of emails that we sent out and then we started to set up a regular cadence of phone calls, especially with our larger partners. So, we start to do weekly or biweekly check-ins even if we didn't have a ton of information to share which many times we didn't, we were just continuing to stay in touch, continuing to maintain the relationship.

Nate Silverman:

And the unique thing about that as a, it gives us the ability. So anytime we had a real time update, essentially get it to our partners before them hearing from the media or hearsay or through other channels. And that's really important to me that our partners are hearing it from our mouths first. I think that it helps them to feel in the know as to what is happening.

Nate Silverman:

But of course, as we look to develop, how is our partnership going to show up this season? And it's also critical that we have those frequent touch points. So that was, that was kind of the first step. And then the second piece, just understanding who's in and who's kind of hesitant to do anything with us.

Nate Silverman:

And so we ultimately have two buckets, I would say at a high level of partners, we had partners who said, Hey, we understand what's happening. We're impacted, but we budgeted for this or our budgets are set and we're not as, we're not hit as hard as some industries. So, we're going to move forward with you.

Nate Silverman:

We're game to figure out new ideas is new ways to innovate. Let's do it. And then we had a bucket of partners who, for a number of reasons, we're not ready to market. Either they had furloughs, layoffs, budget cuts. We all, have seen a lot of this with friends, family colleagues, unfortunately.

Nate Silverman:

In addition to that, there were companies that were hesitant to market because of the pandemic. They didn't feel like pushing products and services were necessarily a

right thing to do at this time. So, they were in this wait and see mode. And for us. We were okay with that. And we allowed some leniency in that sense.

Nate Silverman:

And so, we just continually, still checked in with them as well and waited until we had some clarity around what was going to happen with the season. So now that we have that clarity, we're kind of in our next space of working with them to figure out what are the next steps. The third piece that's woven into that was just immediately, we actually looked at every contracted benefit. I mean, this was like a 800 line item, Excel spreadsheet. And we came up with alternative ideas. So, my team brainstorm with marketing to brainstorm and we thought alternative ideas.

Nate Silverman:

And so right from the gate, that was one of the first things we did allowed us to present new ideas, which many partners jumped on board with and we collaborated to make sure it met their vision to,--so that was that those were kind of some of the key steps we took right out the gate.

Paula Beadle:

Wow, that's great. I really have to applaud you and taking such a proactive approach and bringing your team together and coming up with ideas prior to even maybe having the full discussion with your sponsors, right. Being prepared with some new ideas to share with them. And,--then checking in to see how that fits into their current strategy. I imagine that was really well received from your sponsors and has probably resulted in quite a few of them staying on board with you when this season, when the season begins at the end of July.

Nate Silverman:

It actually gave us the ability to activate immediately. And I know you're very familiar with this world and understand that the shift was heavy into digital. And so that's where we spent a lot of our focus and time is around digital assets, even developing new assets that didn't exist before that we could tag partners along with.

Paula Beadle:

So, I often use this Seattle Storm as an example. In a matter of fact, you spoke about this at last year's Sponsorship Mastery Summit and that is that intersection between social good and sponsorship.

And I think many of us can clearly see that we may be behind but that is the direction that we need to be thinking about and that we need to be traveling, and of course you're way ahead of us. So, Nate, I often use the Seattle Storm as an example of a franchise who has been really successful at integrate partners into social good initiatives in the community, and I think that many of us understand that that's what the future looks like, and we may be a bit behind the curve. You're certainly ahead of, it would love to hear from you how you integrate your partners into your social good efforts.

Nate Silverman:

Yeah, this is one of the WNBA's unique value propositions. And I think a differentiator not only in the Seattle market, but across the country, in the sports world for the league. Obviously, a women's professional sports league, the longest standing women's professional sports league in history of women's professional sports. We're really able to take a look at some of those dynamics that inherently creates.

Nate Silverman:

So women's leadership, young girls leadership and boys, of course, health and wellness, youth health, youth fitness. So, these are some different areas we focus on. And now you look at the age of social justice. And the racial inequalities that are happening the is predominantly African American women. We are a leader in that sense as well. We have the ability to lead from the front and we're starting just with the voices of our players and then we're going to roll out some larger platforms as you start to see 2020 season take place here.

Nate Silverman:

But as we look to integrate partners in what we are doing, it really starts with value alignment with the partner, and getting in and just understanding what their objectives are. And one of the unique things that I have found is that many brands in Seattle, we know they care and they want to do good, and they may have a vision or a sentence, what type of, good or impact they want to have, but they don't really have a platform to activate that.

Nate Silverman:

And so the Seattle Storm actually are able to offer our platform and say, Hey, how about we come together, let's align on a vision that that is mutually agreed, of course, but that can really be driven by ultimately the partner and use our platform to share your story and do good and impact together. And so that's going to show up in a whole lot of ways, you know, with our bigger partners. We actually have these platforms built into our agreements and we offer flexibility on an annual basis.

Nate Silverman:

We have several partners where we will mutually agree to select a community partner. There's a certain dollar element that the Storm are going to give back to said community partner. And then we just figure out each year, what is it going to look like, how are we going to take care of them? There's a, there's kind of a general framework of how we will talk about it and market it.

Nate Silverman:

But in terms of the work we do and the cause and the community benefit, that piece is totally customizable. So that's allowed for a lot of flexibility and it also empowers the partner and I think that's one of the most important pieces of this is that when you have a decision maker or a group of decision makers who are passionate about an idea that you can latch onto that idea and find a way to weave it into promotion and marketing through your team's assets. That's going to be a win win for everybody.

Paula Beadle:

Nate, there's, there's something that you said there that I think is really important and is worth echoing so the audience takes this away from our conversation today, and that is the flexibility in which you include contractually to explore new partnerships and social good initiatives in the future. I think that's great that you do that in your multiyear contracts. It really shows your flexibility and willingness to work with your partners as their strategies change.

Nate Silverman:

Absolutely. And we're not nickel and diming our partners over an email blast or social post or whatever it might be, let's just get in there and figure out what is the best way that we can communicate this to have the highest impact and do the most good in the community. So when those things all aligned, that's when we have a win.

Paula Beadle:

Nate, speaking of doing good in the community, I recently read that the Storm announced a partnership with FareStart to help meet emergency food needs and also ensure a future support of vulnerable populations. Can you tell us more about how your partners are involved in this program? I noticed that there were several who were supporting it.

Nate Silverman:

Yeah. And thank you for taking the time to look at that campaign. That was an important one for us. You know, when, when the pandemic first hit, we wanted to be one of the first teams and one of the first companies to just ask, how can we help the community? Even before the FareStart program, we actually did a fundraiser for Food Lifeline through some t-shirt sales. We donate the proceeds from that to Food Lifeline. Consequently, the league ended up coming up with branded team masks and we helped to guide them towards Food Lifeline for proceeds of the sale of masks to go to Food Lifeline as well. So that was really cool.

Nate Silverman:

And the need continues in our community for individuals impacted by COVID. There's a shortage of food and families who are in at-risk communities or have low income, really don't have the same access to food. You know, you think about school food programs are in many cases not happening anymore.

Nate Silverman:

And that's where parents were relying on kids to get their meals. FareStart was just a great partner for us because they're touching so many different areas of this community. But specifically, right now, focused on helping people who are impacted by COVID. And so, the alignment was there for us.

Nate Silverman:

This one had a little time to grow within the organization and so what we were able to do through the conversations we're having with partners is we start to learn about how partners wanted to have impact. We had already identified number of partners that had said to us, Hey, If there was something food-related where we could give back to the community, we'd be really interested in coming on board with that.

Nate Silverman:

When the FareStart campaign got buttoned up, we rolled to go back to these partners and say, here's what it's going to look like. We're going to launch this fundraiser; would you like to be a part of it? Each of those partners actually ended up making a monetary donation to FareStart as well. That campaign wrapped up on July 2nd and we're going to land somewhere between 20 and \$25,000 raised for FareStart, which is really exciting.

Paula Beadle:

That's terrific. Well, congratulations. The way in which you're working with your partners during this time, I think is really terrific. And again, you know, something that we can all take away from the conversation is that even though we may not know exactly what the future looks like, even within our own organization or certainly for our partners, but just the fact that you have so much communication going on with them and that you're working together to do such great things in the community, is really wonderful. So, congratulations on that program. Any other new partnerships that you've been with working on during this time or that you anticipate announcing in the near future?

Nate Silverman:

Yes, we do have an exciting new partnership, which we worked very closely with the Oak View Group on NHL Seattle. Everyone by now has heard about Climate Pledge Arena and so we were part of those conversations. Amazon will also become a partner of the Seattle Storm when we move into the new building.

Paula Beadle:

Oh, fantastic. I hadn't heard that. Wonderful.

Nate Silverman:

It was part of the agreement. We're really, really excited about it. Obviously, Amazon being one of the largest companies here in Seattle. You know, it's a group that we've worked with before and in other capacities, but not to this large of an extent. So we're very excited about that and grateful to the Oak View Group for helping to guide those conversations with us.

Paula Beadle:

Yeah, Climate Pledge Arena, what an exciting new example of social good and sponsorship, right? As the naming rights, I don't know of anything else in the nation, probably in the world that has been done like that.

Nate Silverman:

Not for this, not to this extent. I haven't seen something that is, I mean, it's integrated from top to bottom in terms of how they want to be carbon neutral carbon net zero.

Paula Beadle:

What do you think the future of sponsorship looks like Nate? And what is some advice that you would give to sponsorship sellers now?

Nate Silverman:

Well, let's hope first and foremost, its live sports and fans attending live sporting events can come back at some point in the near future. In the interim I think a couple of things that have really helped us, one is being flexible. You really, really need to be flexible. And hopefully you've got the relationships built with your partners that they're going to allow for some of that flexibility as well. If you're working on a bit more of a contractual basis and perhaps you don't have the depth of relationship, you may lose partners in this time.

Nate Silverman:

And so I think it's really important to have open and honest conversations. And for us, the flexibility has really been focused around in how we can activate. Alternatively, I mentioned digital earlier, but I think that sellers are really going to need to get comfortable selling digital, really understand the value and the impact and how to put campaigns together focus around digital media.

Nate Silverman:

It's always been a part the last several years, last five to 10 years, it's really been a part and a growing part of corporate partnerships and team partnerships, but I think even more so than ever, teams and sellers really need to dive in on that piece of it. And the other thing that I think we have found that has been helpful, and I mentioned it in terms of the constructs of how we frame a community partnership, is just allowing for flexibility within the contract. Because when something like this hits, the reality is we can't execute a good majority of marketing and promotions most specifically at the building in the arena on game day.

Nate Silverman:

We have a number of partners that were really dialed into game day promotions, signage in the building, interacting with fans, tickets, hospitality, all that stuff that just can't happen. And so we're trying to find obviously alternative ways and alternative value, alternative benefits for them. But I think offering that flexibility, even within the contract, if you are signing a multiyear deal, I'd recommend having some language that actually allows for mutually agreed benefits to be swapped out or exchanged on annual basis. Because if you hit a situation like this, you are going to be a little bit more protected.

Paula Beadle:

Very smart. So Nate, the Storm has a really impressive list of partners, would love to have you share or maybe just one secret to your success.

Nate Silverman:

You know, for me, I think it comes with number one, every year, I do a deep dive and recap on the previous year I look at what's worked what hasn't worked, where can I tweak and change my strategies.

Nate Silverman:

And I think from that standpoint, I approach this like a student, and I've been in the sports business for 20 plus years now in corporate partnerships specifically for almost 15 years. But I still view myself as a student. So, I'm always searching for new content, new ways to learn, talking to colleagues across the industry, know when I see big deals or really intriguing deals like the Climate Pledge Arena, you know, I want to learn more about how does that come together? How does that work? Because it just opens your eyes to new possibilities. So, I think that that for me has been one of the most important things. And then second and close to that has been just relationship building.

Nate Silverman:

We are in the relationship business and corporate partnerships are not a transactional sale. We know that they can take six to 12 months, sometimes even longer. We hope not, but sometimes longer than that, and so I think it's really important that we work to build relationships, not just with one person, but with multiple people in the organization.

Nate Silverman:

So to that extent, put yourself in a position where you can network with these decision makers, you know, where you can be in front of them, where you can be around them, have opportunities to meet, take them to lunch, those kinds of things. Now that's changing cause everything's virtual now. So, you know, maybe you're doing a Zoom coffee date or something to happy hour, but for me, those are the two things constantly be a student and continually remind myself, this is the relationship business.

Paula Beadle:

Yeah, that's great advice. And I know that to be true because I've seen you in action. I've been at events like the Special Olympic events, and you're there with your partner Bank of America who also supports Special Olympics. I've seen you in action. And I know that you really mean that when you say it.

Nate Silverman:

Absolutely.

Paula Beadle:

Yeah, that's great. Thank you for sharing that. So, Nate, before I let you go, I just have to ask anything that you're excited about looking forward to the summer.

Nate Silverman:

You know, I have to say, I'm excited to get the season and started. With the WNBA rankings came out recently and the Storm are ranked number one. So no pressure. We got a target on our back. We've got a solid team. We're healthy, our whole squad's back right now. So really excited for the opportunity to win another title. We'll see. But in general, live sports coming back, I'm excited to, I'm a big basketball guy looking forward to seeing what the NFL does. You know, major league soccer is coming up soon, so it's nice to have sports back isn't it?

Paula Beadle:

Yeah, it sure is. Well, thank you. It was really nice talking to you today. Thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your great insights and ideas. Really helpful. Thank you.

Nate Silverman:

Thank you. And I'd say register for the Sponsorship Mastery Summit now.

Paula Beadle:

Oh, thanks so much. It was really a hard decision for us to make, but you know, it was people like you, Nate, and people who attended last year that encouraged us to move forward, and to do the summit this year virtually and also live for those who want to get together in small groups. So thank you for the, for the support. We're excited to do it again this year.

Nate Silverman:

It was a great event, good networking, and a lot of key learnings.

Paula Beadle:

Great. Thank you. We'll look forward to having you join us again this year.