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Phoenix Coyotes will go after Suns fans, business partners if NBA lockout persists

Phoenix Business Journal by Mike Sunnucks, Senior Reporter

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The **Phoenix Coyotes** will specifically go after basketball fans and **Phoenix Suns** business sponsors and ticket holders if the **National Basketball Association's** lockout persists and eats up the 2011-12 regular season.

"In the event that the NBA does cancel their entire season, we will implement our marketing plans that include a direct effort to offer basketball fans a great alternative," said Coyotes COO [Mike Nealy](#), the hockey franchise's top executive.

Nealy said its still not certain how long the NBA lockout will last because of a lack of collective bargaining agreement. The NBA and Phoenix Suns already have canceled November games and more nixed games could be on the way.

"With the uncertainty of the NBA season, we recognize that there is an opportunity for us to benefit, but it is difficult to make detailed plans when we don't know the duration of the NBA work stoppage," Nealy said.

The Coyotes are receiving interest from NBA fans about tickets to games, but the team also wants to go after businesses that may use the Suns games to entertain clients and sales

prospects, or reward employees with tickets, he said.

"Businesses that traditionally rely on the Phoenix Suns for client entertainment do not have that option at the moment. With limited options in the marketplace, we feel this is the ideal time for these companies to hear our message and consider our product as a viable alternative to the NBA," Nealy said. "We can offer them everything from a state of the art venue with great amenities to an entertaining, quality product on the ice that will provide them with the perfect atmosphere to conduct their business."

The Coyotes need all the help they can muster during the early portion of the **National Hockey League** season. The team is averaging just over 10,000 fans per game, according to ESPN. That's 29th out of 30 NHL teams.

The Coyotes draw decent crowds on weekends at Jobing.com Arena in Glendale. But the franchise has struggled the past few seasons to get fans to weeknight games, especially when football season is dominating the sports landscape in November, December and January. The Coyotes attendance tends to improve after football season is over.

The team has been stepping up its marketing and business outreach this season. The team hired Fallon Minneapolis as its advertising agency earlier this year and the firm has launched a new billboard and ad campaign to promote the team. The Coyotes have also been specifically reaching out to businesses to promote ticket sales and try to boost sponsorships. The franchise has been rebuilding its stable of sponsors since its Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization filing in 2009. The Coyotes have been owned by the NHL since October 2009 and have repeatedly faced the possibility of being moved out of the Phoenix market.

Having home games in Glendale is a challenge for the Coyotes, who are trying to attract new fans and business partners who might be located in the East Valley, said [Scott Harkey](#), a partner and sports marketing expert with the **Owens Harkey Associates** advertising agency.

"Being located in the West Valley the Coyotes have a huge disadvantage because of the proximity of the stadium to the East Valley population. If you looking at the Valley's demographics, East Valley residents are much more likely to spend money on sporting events," said Harkey. "Those residents are fine with traveling 45 minutes and beyond for a few Sunday football games, but games on a school night are a hard sell."

The Suns and other teams did not comment on the NBA lockout's impact or the Coyotes' plans.

One business segment where the Coyotes have solid footing is with Canadians visiting or doing business in the Valley. Canadian transplants, snowbirds, real estate investors and business people in the Valley say they will often use hockey games to entertain brethren

from north of the border.

"Many of our **Canada-Arizona Business Council** members do use the Coyotes games for entertainment purposes," said [Glenn Williamson](#), founder of the CABC and a Valley investment executive.

[Blake Parker](#), president of **Canavest Group**, a commercial real estate firm in Scottsdale, said he likes to entertain some clients at US Airways Center downtown because it's "a little more glamorous destination to take people for dinner and drinks before the game." But Parker said when fellow Canadians come to town he gravitates towards Coyotes games.

Harkey said the Coyotes could gear more of their marketing towards fans whose allegiances might align with Canadian teams or teams back east with followings and transplant fans in the Valley.

There has also been an influx of Canadians buying real estate in the Valley. Local real estate use the Coyotes games to schmooze their clients.

"My clients love when I take them to hockey games," said [Diane Brennan](#), a **Keller Williams Realty** agent in Scottsdale who specializes in working with Canadian investors. "For me, it gives me a chance to get to know them better and what they're looking for in a property. For them, they love the paradox of watching a hockey game after swimming in an outdoor pool or playing 18 holes of golf.

Brennan added that Coyotes ticket prices are much less expensive than for teams in Canada. The Coyotes have the second cheapest tickets in the NHL, according to Team Marketing Report. Canadian teams including the Toronto Maple Leafs and Montreal Canadiens have highest ticket prices.

Mike Sunnucks writes about politics, law, airlines, sports business and the economy.