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**TITLE OF CASE STUDY: *Bellator MMA Live Launch***

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**BUSINESS SITUATION**

From 2005 to 2011, Spike TV had enjoyed considerable success broadcasting competitions of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) mixed martial arts (MMA) league. Prior to – and to a lesser degree, during – the sport's run on Spike, MMA had developed a reputation as being unforgivably violent and too primitive to be regarded by the masses or advertisers as a true professional sport.

In 2011, the right to those UFC broadcasts moved to the Fox TV, FX, and Fuel networks. Not willing to walk away entirely from the sport of MMA, in 2012 Spike entered into an agreement to begin broadcasting competitions from the little-known but up-and-coming Bellator league starting early 2013. The introduction of the league to Spike TV would be in the form of a weekly series of live competitions titled *Bellator MMA Live*.

Bellator's approach to the sport differs from that of the UFC in that Bellator employs an NCAA basketball-type "bracket"-style structure to arrange the match-ups in its tournaments, while the UFC relies on the short-term desires of the league and its promoters to arrange matches (Bellator's motto: "where title shots are earned, not given"). The league's programming had been airing for a year on the MTV2 network, but to very small audiences (the latest season there had averaged just 177,000 viewers per week). For this new agreement to be profitable for Spike TV, ratings would need to increase substantially from where they were with MTV2 right off the bat. For that to happen, Spike would need to prepare and execute a thorough launch marketing campaign, as if Bellator were a brand new brand.

At the time of the UFC's launch on Spike TV several years ago, that league had already developed a substantial following and profile through its series of somewhat controversial pay-per-view events. During the time of the league's relationship with Spike, several of its fighters grew to become full-fledged stars, crossing over into film and television acting appearances. Meanwhile, as far as the marketplace was concerned, the UFC had essentially become synonymous with the sport of MMA. Marketing the UFC, then, is and was a different type of exercise from marketing Bellator today. With none of the abovementioned advantages on its side, Bellator would have to create its own path to success. Simply following the UFC marketing game plan would not work here.

Our business objective for the launch of Bellator was two-fold:

- 1) to increase viewership at least 200% from the levels the show enjoyed during its most recent season on the MTV2 network
- 2) to reinvent the image of the sport from one centered around brutality to one centered around the dedication of the individual athletes, so as to attract a broader range of sponsors

The total budget for the launch campaign was less than \$3 million, or less than the cost of one Superbowl ad.

The marketing strategy had three main components:

- 1) Inform MMA fans of the new Spike-Bellator relationship
- 2) Elevate the profiles of Bellator's roster of fighters
- 3) Identify and emphasize valuable points of differentiation with UFC

## RESEARCH STORY

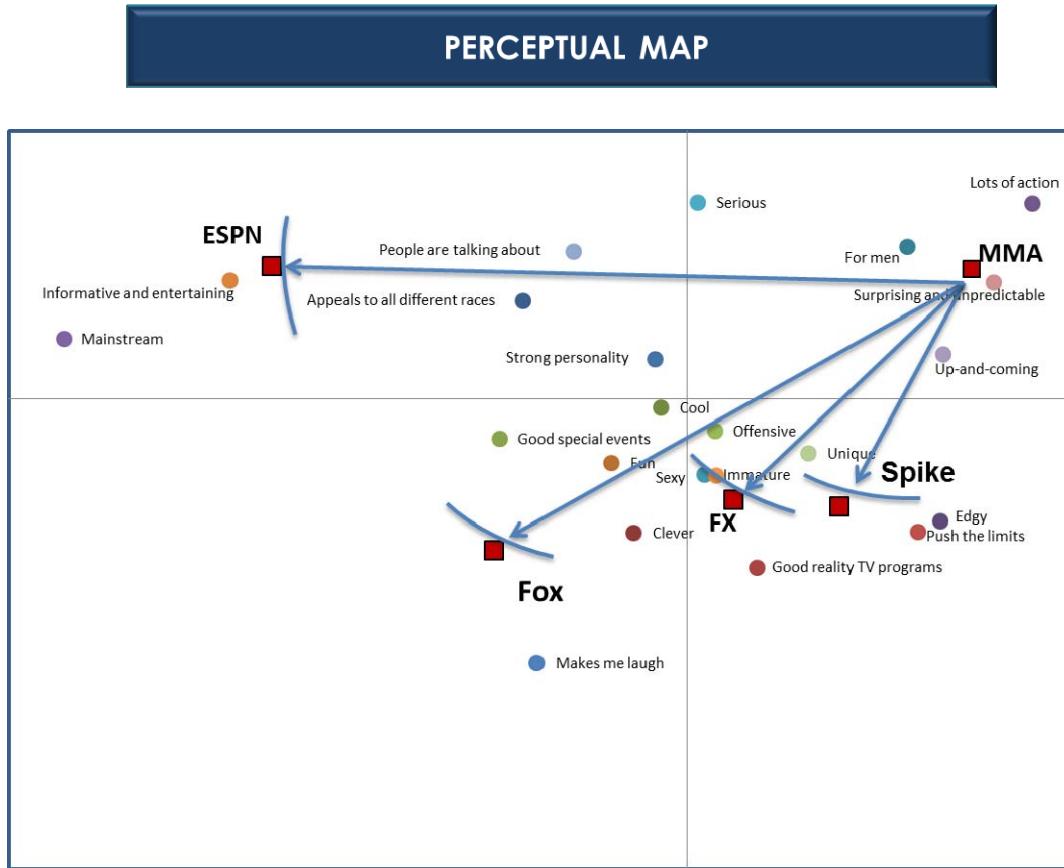
### Method

Our first step in developing the creative strategy was to engage in a round of exploratory research. The purpose of the research was 1) to determine how much the audience knew about Bellator, 2) to develop an understanding of how audiences relate to media broadcasts of the sport, and 3) to uncover sources of the sport's appeal. To address these and other questions, we conducted a two-phase study. Part 1 involved in-home ethnographic interviews around the country with small groups of friends who watch MMA. As part of these interviews, we sat and watched MMA broadcasts with the participants and discussed their reactions to various aspects of what they were watching. Phase 2 was a large-scale nationwide survey of MMA viewers, in which we measured the relative appeal of various components of the sport and the leagues.

### Key Findings

Significant findings included:

- Viewers consider Spike's brand image to be closer to that of the sport than the image of any of its competitors:



- As an MMA league, Bellator is widely regarded by fans as a far inferior version of the category-leading Ultimate Fighting Championships (*sample viewer quote: "UFC is the National Football League, Bellator is the Canadian Football League"*).
- There is strong interest among viewers in Bellator's bracket-style approach to arranging the competition (*51% of MMA fans said the tournament approach adds "a lot" to the presentation of MMA programming. Sample viewer quote: "...it would definitely make me more interested because it's like I know that if this guy loses, he's dumped."*).
- Viewers like to root for individual fighters (*48% of fans said the chance to do so is one of the best things about the sport*) and learn a bit about their back-stories to gain a sense of personal investment and a rooting interest in the fights (*sample viewer quotes: "If get to know that particular fighter, and get to know what they are about, instead of just throwing him out there... give me a little*

*bio on him.” “If you give me the back-story first, then I’ll care what the coach is saying.”) Yet we found that even hardcore MMA fans were not familiar with most Bellator fighters.*

5. There is a good degree of usage of digital resources by consumers to engage with the sport and with individual fighters (*58% of fans said they like to follow the sport online, and 45% like to follow individual fighters online*. Meanwhile, *65% expressed interest in being able to vote online for the competition matchups they would like to see, and 52% were interested in an online fantasy league/bracket competition*)

#### Link to Campaign Development and Execution

The perceived difference in quality between Bellator and the UFC was so large that we decided not to waste energy trying to convince the viewers that Bellator was equivalent to the UFC. Instead, we decided to position the league as the underdog alternative, and to look for clues as to how make

Bellator appealing within that positioning.

- 1) To leverage the finding that the sport’s brand image was closer to that of Spike than to our competitors, we created a teaser spot entitled “Coming Home” to deliver the basic message that *Bellator MMA Live* represented the return of the sport to the media brand most closely associated with it in the minds of the viewer. The spot uses a clip of the recent hit song of the same name by P Diddy, with the female singer Skylar Grey providing vocals, playing over muted-color-palette video of the fighters and of fights before closing with the message that MMA was returning to Spike this January. Notable about the tone of this approach from a creative standpoint is how it emphasizes a sense of heart and grit, rather than relying entirely on flash and violence – which would have been more appropriate to the UFC, but would have run contrary to what the research suggested we should be trying to accomplish with our creative.
- 2) We decided one of the keys to our success would be to increase the awareness of and viewer investment in our fighters. Accordingly, we developed a 3-medium approach to promoting the Bellator roster:
  - a. For mass awareness, a campaign of on-air 30-second spots, each dedicated to a single fighter
  - b. A print campaign giving each of several key fighters his own page, positioning him not as a wrecking machine, but as an underdog regular guy awaiting his shot at the title. The idea was to evoke images of pre-fight *Rocky*, or Eminem’s character in the movie *8 Mile*.
  - c. As the research showed strong usage of the web by fans for following favorite fighters, we created a series of fighter profile videos specifically to live on spike.com and spike’s facebook page. These profiles took advantage of the time and space available to explore the fighters’ professional stories in more depth than would be possible in an on-air spot. Additionally, in light of the observed viewer interest in participating in online voting we created an opportunity for fans to involve themselves in the structure of the competition through “vote for the fight,” in which viewers could vote on which matchups of fighters they would like to see after learning through the video what was at the heart of each fighter’s drive and motivation. This approach not only built awareness about the fighters, but drove viewer investment in their personal success.
- 3) To take advantage of the value viewers ascribe to the unique tournament structure, we set out throughout our creative to deploy the universally-recognized imagery of a tournament bracket as a key visual symbol of *Bellator MMA Live*, including a particularly memorable “flaming” version of it in various print and on-air executions, and in the background of the Bellator MMA section of the spike.com website.

Further, in response to the viewers’ expressed interest in an online bracket fantasy league, we gave visitors to craveonline.com’s sports section a chance to create their own online fantasy brackets, using the actual fighters scheduled to participate in the upcoming tournament, and share them on facebook.

Finally, in trailers we created to run in National Cinemas movie theaters, we had the founder of Bellator on-screen explaining the tournament structure – win 3 fights, and you get a shot at the title – in a manner so clear and attractive that no sports fans can resist latching-on to the concept.

- 4) All of this was wrapped up in a package designed directly as a result of the research's findings suggesting value in differentiation from the UFC:

- a. Because the league's original official name – Bellator Fighting Championships –was derivative of the UFC's official name, Ultimate Fighting Championships, the official name was changed to Bellator MMA Championship Tournaments – again reinforcing the unique tournament imagery
- b. The logo was changed from a large image of a Roman gladiator's head to a bold circle, symbolizing the circular ring Bellator uses (as opposed to the octagon-shaped ring of the UFC)
- c. We also evolved the tagline to “the Toughest Tournament in Sports,” featuring it in writing and in voiceovers in our TV spots, not just to further emphasize the tournament structure, but also to promote the point that mixed martial arts is a full-fledged, mainstream sport.

## MEDIA STRATEGY

Without the resources required to mount a national TV campaign, we had to rely on local market TV and to a substantial degree on the efficiency afforded by deploying digital media. The target demographic for our campaign was men 18-49. Within that, we segmented the target into 2 groups: MMA fans and general sports fans. We used TV to generate mass awareness, print and radio to reach general sports fans, and digital both to reach sports fans and to activate the MMA fanbase:

For MMA fans, we:

- ran TV spots in local markets during UFC broadcasts on Fox and FX
- did page takeovers at craveonline.com sports page; combat sports sites like sherdog, wrestlezone, and ringtv; and sbnation.com's NFL page, and
- hosted the in-depth “vote for the fight” fighter profile series on spike.com.

For sports fans, we emphasized more mainstream media :

- ran TV spots in local markets during NBA broadcasts on ABC and TNT
- ran banners on sports websites like CBSSports.com, yahoosports.com, and in the sports sections of local newspaper websites in more than a dozen key markets
- did homepage takeovers on sportsillustrated.com
- issued tune-in announcements on Spike's facebook and twitter feeds
- aired radio spots on nationally-syndicated sports talk radio show *Ferrall on the Bench*
- ran print spots in *ESPN the Magazine* and *USA Today*'s sports section
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- trailers in National Cinemas movie theaters, and printed media in sports bars around the country.

To maximize our reach and capture potential viewers outside of traditional sports media outlets, we also ran TV spots on entertainment cable networks like VH1, Comedy Central, and TV Land. The campaign ran from December 8, 2012 through the day of launch, January 17, 2013.

In the days and weeks leading up to the launch, we conducted awareness and viewing intent tracking surveys, and using a proprietary algorithm we have developed, we calculated that we were all but certain to meet our audience volume goals, and therefore needed no corrective action with respect to media strategy in the days prior to launch.

## BUSINESS RESULTS

Viewership: The premiere of *Bellator MMA Live* earned a .65 rating in men 18-49 and nearly 1 million viewers overall. It was the highest-rated and most-watched Bellator broadcast ever, with 400% more total viewers – and a 200% higher M18-49 rating – than the previous season premiere on MTV2, as well as over 400% more total viewers and over 300% M18-49 above the preceding season's average. It even matched the total number of viewers earned by the preceding season premiere of the UFC's much more established MMA series *The Ultimate Fighter* in the season ending this past December on FX, and was 3% higher than

that show's season average. It accomplished all of this opposite unusually stiff competition from the world of sports in the form of a simultaneous NBA Basketball game between two of the league's highest-profile teams, the Los Angeles Lakers and the league champion Miami Heat, as well as the big Oprah Winfrey interview of disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong.

Media reaction:

"...the question was how much of a difference [in the ratings] the move [to Spike TV] would make.... We now have an answer. Bellator's Spike TV debut was a resounding success." – *Yahoo Sports*, 1/18/13  
"This is a great number for Bellator out of the gate, partially proving Spike's theory that they're synonymous with MMA correct." – *MMA Torch*, 1/18/13

"...last night was an extremely big ratings night for a great deal of the television shows and Bellator passed this test with flying colors." – *The MMA Report*, 1/18/13

Sponsorship: Several advertisers new to Bellator and to MMA on Spike have signed on to sponsor *Bellator MMA Live*, including brands that typically target an older/broader demographic than the traditional core MMA audience of 18-34 year-old males, like: Jos. A. Bank; H+R Block; Just For Men; and Weight Watchers. This is a clear sign that with a relatively modest budget, the campaign has managed to repaint the image of the program, from that of a violent exhibition aimed at young men, to that of a true sporting event appropriate for a broad range of sports fans.