

To score in business, buckle the chinstrap

When I was growing up, like so many other boys of that era, I found myself idolizing the Green Bay Packers. Bart Starr, Paul Hornung, Max McGee, Willie Wood, Ron Kramer, Carroll Dale, Henry Jordan, Herb Adderley, Forest Gregg and Ray Nitschke were the stuff of legends. I found myself following their accomplishments on the field every Sunday between September and December.

Today, football seems to span nearly the entire year, what with the Super Bowl in February, drafts in the spring and practices beginning in July with preseason starting in August. Throw in fantasy football leagues, junior programs, coaching changes, personnel developments, stadium construction and extensive media coverage and you begin to wonder if any business gets done in a world where football reigns supreme.

So why all the fascination with football?

I suppose there are several reasons. First off, we truly have a herd mentality. For most of us, there is this need to belong to a team. We want to feel that we are part of something much larger than ourselves and the bigger the team the stronger the emotion.

I doubt that there are many sports with more collective personnel than an organized football team — what with the coaches, players, assistant coaches, conditioning and strength coaches, trainers, owners, scout team and front office personnel.

Another consideration would be the

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uniforms and the relative anonymity they provide. Contrast this with basketball players, who by comparison appear to be almost naked and vulnerable.

Yet another explanation might include the clear definition between offense, defense and special teams. And of course there is the matter of big dollars . . . numbers so large they defy comprehension.

So are there any parallels between football and business? I believe so.

A great football team has to have an effective offense, dominating defense and strong special teams coverage. When a team is on offense, its goal is to score points. How this is done rests upon a balance between a running and passing game.

I liken this to dealing with your customers. Customers demand to know how you intend to make your goods/services affordable and how this will create value for them . . . hence the balance. Failure to address both leaves you with a one-sided game plan that is

open for attack.

Something else to consider is how plays are called. There is but one signal caller on the field, the quarterback. While he may take the play called in by the coach there should be no question in the huddle as to who has field authority and what needs to be done. In other words there is no confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Have you ever noticed the difference in demeanor between an offensive and defensive lineman? Offensive linemen go to great lengths to protect the quarterback as well as the ball. Defensive linemen seem to relish in creating chaos . . . more on them in a bit.

One last thought on offense. Great teams have figured out that while statistics are interesting, what wins games is points on the board. Put another way effort is all fine and dandy but what keeps the coffers full are completed sales orders.

Defensive play in the world of business is quite often overlooked. What I mean by defense is the study of your competition when setting strategy. I am not suggesting that businesses focus exclusively on their competition, for this is generally unhealthy as well as unproductive. After all, there is not much you can do to change what your competition does.

However, what you should be doing is asking yourself what your industry is doing to respond to the same challenges and developments that you are. I am reminded of an interview that Rick Wagoner, CEO of General Motors, gave

when he acknowledged that the problems GM was trying to solve were the very same problems that were confronting its competition. So while GM was coming up with great solutions for the moment, the complexity of the business environment was shifting to an even more complex theater.

Special teams are all about field position. If you are punting you want to pin your opponents to their own goal line. If you are on the receiving team you want to run the ball down as far as possible, if not into the end zone. This shortens the field for your offense. Special teams work is really the bridge between offense and defense.

In the world of business this is where your corporate talent asserts itself. These are the folks who satisfy the demands of the customers while helping to outwit your competition. Special teams as a label is most appropriate when addressing the issue of people.

I suspect there have been countless college doctoral theses written about this topic. But since I am late for a practice, I will have to put on my pads and call it a day. Drop me a line if you think of any others. I am always interested in adding a few more pages to my playbook.

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