

Lexus buys naming rights to Panthers' rink

BY DON MURET

STAFF WRITER

The Florida Panthers, striving to meet the needs of a longtime corporate partner, have sold the naming rights to the ice floor at their arena to automaker Lexus, the first deal of its kind in the NHL and only the second one in major league sports.

When the Panthers play their first 2011-12 preseason game in mid-September, the playing surface officially will be called Lexus Rink at the BankAtlantic Center. The deal's value is in the mid- to upper six figures annually, sources said.

The only other deal in the majors in which a team has sold naming rights to its playing surface is in Minneapolis, where the Vikings signed Mall of America in October 2009 to a three-year deal putting its name on the Metrodome field. That deal is reportedly worth seven figures annually.

In south Florida, the twist on traditional naming rights provides greater public exposure for a company that has been a founding partner and sponsor of the arena's suite/club level since the facility opened in 1998. The extension moves Lexus' assets from those premium spaces to the inner bowl, something company officials requested during negotiations, said Michael Yormark, president and chief operating officer for Sunrise Sports & Entertainment, the Panthers' parent company.

"This is their third renewal, and Lexus was looking for something a bit different, the 'next big idea,'" Yormark said. "They still have their [branded] parking lot deal

for all events, but they challenged me to come up with something new. ... For us, it created new inventory that we haven't taken advantage of in the past."

Lexus officials from the four local dealerships principally involved in the deal would not comment for this story.

Naming-rights deals for playing surfaces are rare in the majors, where leagues have restrictions on whether and how brands can be displayed on the field, court or ice:

- The NFL prohibits corporate logos of any kind on the field.

- NBA teams can display commercial brands on the hardwood if they are part of the facility's name.

- MLB does not allow corporate logos on the field of play with the exception of the AstroTurf brand in foul territory at Rogers Centre in Toronto and Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg.

- Major League Soccer allows corporate logos outside the white lines of play and on field-level video boards.

- NHL rules allow teams to sell four advertising positions on the ice. A space adjacent to the center circle can also be sold if the corporate brand is part of the building name.

The Lexus deal does not include in-ice exposure because the Panthers have already sold their four in-ice spots, to Bud Light, Dex Imaging, Ford and Gulfstream Park. The BankAtlantic Center name is painted near the center circle.

The renewal does give Lexus the first right to buy in-ice space when it becomes



A rendering shows how the main scoreboard might display the Lexus Rink name.

available, Yormark said.

For Panthers home games, the Lexus Rink brand will be spelled out front and center for hockey fans on a new permanent sign attached to the bottom of the center-hung scoreboard. Lexus Rink at the BankAtlantic Center marks will also adorn the "lip" at the top of the dashboards facing the seats in the lower bowl, in addition to the Lexus Rink at the BankAtlantic Center name flashed on the traditional LED ribbon boards.

During home game broadcasts, Fox Sports Florida and WQAM radio announcers will reference the Lexus Rink, Yormark said.

The terms of the agreement stipulate that Lexus Rink signs will not be activated for concerts and other shows at the arena that do not use the ice floor, Panthers officials said. That means the Lexus brand will go dark in the bowl for roughly 150 dates when the scoreboard is raised to the rafters and its multiple car displays, a piece of activation

carried over from the old deal, are removed from the concourses.

Naming-rights consultant Randy Bernstein sees what the Vikings and the Panthers did as a natural progression for naming rights. Colleges and minor league teams have been doing these deals for years, and it is not a stretch to see that trend migrate upward, Bernstein said.

In Minnesota, the Vikings are squeezing as much revenue as they can from a publicly owned stadium where they are a tenant. State law prohibits the stadium's official name, the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome, from being changed, said Bill Lester, executive director of the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission. The Mall of America Field deal expires Feb. 28, 2012, soon after the team's lease runs out at the Metrodome following the 2011 season. (A new Teflon roof is being installed to replace the one damaged from a December snowstorm and like the old roof will be adorned with the Mall of America logo).

"It is a unique opportunity for sports facilities, especially those that cannot officially change their name to include a corporate sponsor," said Steve LaCroix, the Vikings' vice president of sales and marketing and chief marketing officer. "I would expect to see more of these [deals] in the future."

An important issue to consider for doing these "sub-naming-rights" deals is the effect on the naming-rights deal for the facility itself, Bernstein said. BankAtlantic was aware of the Panthers' deal with Lexus before it was signed, team officials said.

Concert sponsored by Coke Zero a first for MMOD

BY MICHAEL SMITH

STAFF WRITER

When March Madness on Demand streamed the Kings of Leon concert Saturday, it marked the first time that something other than a basketball game had been broadcast on MMOD.

The concert, sponsored by Coca-Cola Zero as part of the NCAA's "Big Dance" at Houston's Discovery Green, was one of two major programming initiatives by the soft drink company over the Final Four weekend.

Coke Zero also sponsored a Saturday afternoon show on CBS called "Most Impressive Moments of March Madness," which aired at 3 p.m. and served as a college basketball lead-in for the network's pregame coverage.

Coke's agency for the Final Four since 2003, Atlanta-based Melt, produced the TV show and the Kings of Leon concert with the help of CBS Sports producer Craig Silver. Crispin Porter & Bogusky, Coke Zero's ad agency in Boulder, Colo., worked on strategy as well.

"What we want to do is provide the excitement of the Final Four to all of the fans, those in Houston and those who can't be in Houston," said William White, group director for Coke Zero and Diet Coke.

Coca-Cola, as an NCAA corporate champion, annually sponsors a Final Four concert and floods CBS with advertising throughout the NCAA tournament.

But White said the company was looking for activation opportunities that could ex-



A song by concert performers the Kings of Leon has been used in tournament broadcasts.

tend beyond the usual presence at the "Big Dance" and "Bracket Town," the NCAA's fan fest area.

In conversations with the NCAA's partners, CBS and Turner, Coke wanted more activity on MMOD. It already advertised heavily on the online channel with 15-second and 30-second spots, but it wanted to bring more elements to life.

"We love the TV, but we wanted more online," White said. "We really wanted to make sure that we reach the 18-34 guys in the richest way possible. Traditional TV is a great way to talk to your audience, but we know with 18-34, they spend a lot of time in the digital world and the social world. For

them, content is king. They've grown up in the digital media world and they expect great access and impressive content.

"To make sure we delivered that, we had to go deeper."

Meanwhile, Turner was seeking to integrate a popular band and song into the opening of the tournament broadcasts. Kings of Leon and their song "Immortals" were identified earlier this year. The band agreed to be part of the Final Four, and Coke gave them the thumbs up to perform in Houston.

"The challenge is to get a band that everybody is going to like, from Turner to CBS to Coke and the NCAA," said Craig Barry, Turner's senior vice president of

creative and content. "It turned out, when we contacted the band, that they're all college sports fans and we know they've got a huge rock and indie following, so you're reaching a broad demo as well."

Coke had streamed last year's Daughtry concert in Indianapolis onto its Facebook page, and the natural progression was to take Kings of Leon to MMOD this year.

"What we're seeing is really the evolution of the Final Four as a global property that reaches audiences around the world," said Vince Thompson, president and CEO of Melt, who worked on his ninth straight Final Four. "I think it's on par with the Super Bowl as a mega sports and entertainment event, or at least a very close No. 2."

Coke Zero's White was influenced by the stats from last year, which showed 11.7 million hours of video was streamed on MMOD. Those numbers have remained strong this year with a 60 percent increase in total visits to MMOD going into the Final Four weekend.

"I like to consider the concert an extension of our event content," Turner's Barry said. "The broader we can go to bring experience to the viewer, the better off we'll be."

The 30-minute "Most Impressive" show on CBS tied in another online initiative, Coke Zero's social arena on NCAA.com. The social arena aggregated Twitter posts and other social media information about the NCAA tournament into a centralized website, ncaa.com/cokezerosocialarena.