





THE WORD IS OUT

Larry Wilson created a buzz about his arena months before it opened

by DAVE BROOKS



John Paul Jones Arena, Charlottesville, Va.

Before opening the doors to the John Paul Jones Arena, Larry Wilson had thousands of people in the Charlottesville, Va., area carefully following the building's progress. They were logging on to his website, reading construction updates and clicking on the arena's web cam.

And more importantly, Larry Wilson knew these people and how to get a hold of them. He had compiled thousands of e-mail addresses through "Keeping Up With the Joneses," a marketing initiative that helped him secure this year's Hall of Headlines Award for Marketing.

"We developed our program on our own," Wilson said of the initiative, which now holds about 25,000 users in its database. "Once we came up with the catchy name it took on a life of its own and worked to our benefit."

"Keeping Up With the Joneses" is an opt-in e-mail newsletter run by the two-person marketing staff at the John Paul Jones Arena to keep visitors up-to-date on concerts and special events at the 16,000-seat arena. Besides marketing tickets for the arena's men's and women's basketball team, the weekly e-newsletter provides information about pre-sales, event parking, concessions specials and merchandising efforts."

Wilson said the system has paid off and helped the facility secure a number of sell-out events including its Aug. 7, 2006, opening with Charlottesville locals the Dave Matthews Band.

"We were treading into new territory when we planned this facility," he said. "There's a lot of music history in Charlottesville. There's a ton of small clubs who do a lot of business, but there's never really been a venue such as John Paul Jones Arena to do the type of acts that we're doing. Prior to us, you had to drive to Washington, D.C., or Roanoke (Va.) or a different type of city and, now, most of our patrons who live in the region can come to our facility for the big name acts."

Besides Matthews, Wilson has used the campaign to market sellout performances by Kenny Chesney, Eric Clapton, High School Musical, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rascal Flatts, and Billy Joel.

"Our market is a very a high-end market with a lot of disposable income and we knew we would draw from the surrounding

region," he said. "We knew we could sell tickets if we got the right acts and luckily we've been able to do that. I think going in, nobody really knew what we could sell."

The "Keeping Up With the Joneses" platform takes about 10 to 15 seconds to sign up for and is powered by John Paul Jones Arena's ticketing company, MusicToday, a subsidiary of Live Nation. He credits the creation

of the name to his Director of Marketing Liz Flynn.

"We even called our benefactor and asked if he was okay with us using the name," Wilson said. "He loved it and gave us the green light."

During the slower summer months, Wilson and his staff work with MusicToday to analyze the data they've compiled through "Keeping Up With The Joneses." They map out geographically which fans are attending which shows and try to build a demographic for different artists.

"To have that data at our fingertips is critical," he said. "To be able to stay in touch with our fans and patrons on a weekly basis is how we've been successful and I think moving forward, facilities have got to do that more and more because there are so many opportunities for the patron to go purchase movie tickets or fair tickets or sporting events. For us to get them to come to our live music event is a huge piece of the puzzle."

HOK Principal Russ Simons spent many years working with Wilson, first hiring him as an intern and then an employee at the Pyramid in Memphis, and then bringing him on to help open the Nashville Arena, now the Sommet Center.

"At that point in his career, I think he was ready to take on that building. He was able to really tackle it head-on," Simons said. "He's highly energetic, motivated and has a can-do attitude — all things that you really need to succeed in this business."

Wilson continues to work hard, pulling a 70-hour work-week during basketball season. Despite his hectic schedule, his job actually affords him more time with his family since his two sons, Trace, 13, and Jack, 12, enjoying attending men's and women's Cavaliers games. He tries to bring his wife, Crystal, along whenever he's on the road.

"We really enjoy all types of travel, whether it's going to New York City or just hanging by the beach," he said.

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