

The puck stops here

BY ROBERT THOMPSON

The National Hockey League needs to utilize high-profile supporters such as Hollywood star Jim Carrey, and market the game almost like a new sport when it emerges from its current labour dispute, according to Brad Robins, one of Canada's best-known sports marketing experts.

"We need to look at this as a new product or a new brand," he said. "We need to put the past in a box and we need to market this accordingly."

Mr. Robins, independent consultant to sports giant IMG Hockey, as well as running his own firm, Intellectual Capital, says it is time for hockey to reconsider all of its options, said the NHL needs to reconsider all of its options, even factors that have been ridiculed in the past.

He points to the Fox television network's much maligned use of the highlighted puck in its telecasts as a concept that needs to be revisited if hockey is to be successful in some U.S. markets.

"We need to take a look at much of how the game is played," he said. "We laughed at the Fox puck, but maybe it was the right idea."

Even parts of the game some consider staples like fighting

should be re-evaluated in order to market the game to the broadest possible audience.

"These are hot-button issues," he said. "Everyone says fighting is part of hockey, but how much of this is hockey guys talking among themselves?"

Mr. Robins said the NHL needs to start considering these issues now, and have a plan in place as soon as the labour dispute ends.

"The powers that be need to take a look at their investment and gauge their marketing spending accordingly," Mr.

tional Basketball Association, have had strikes in the past decade, Mr. Robins said there is no template on how to market a sport emerging from a labour dispute.

He said the media landscape has changed since baseball and hockey ended their labour issues, in 1994 and 1998 respectively, and a new strategy needs to be considered for hockey.

"A lot of the delivery methods to get a message out have changed since baseball or basketball were out," he said. "The overall market is more fragmented,

motional measure that reintroduces the game.

Mr. Robins said in order for the league to regain some of the fans who have disappeared due to the lockout, players and owners will have to put the labour dispute behind them and work together to market hockey.

"Fan attrition is going to force the owners and players to work hand in hand if they want to make hockey a success again," he said.

Mr. Robins is not the only person who feels the NHL needs to start considering its promotion strategy even though an end to the lockout does not appear to be forthcoming.

Ken King, president of the Calgary Flames, says even though his team went to the Stanley Cup finals in 2004, it will need to have a full marketing strategy in place when the labour dispute ends.

Mr. King said that strategy has to acknowledge the lockout and its effect on the game, while also indicating the sport has emerged stronger because of it.

"From a marketing standpoint, we need to help the fans understand that we are past the labour issue," he said.

"Then we need to demonstrate to the fans that we have a superior product to what we had in the past."

'We need to put the past in a box'

Robins said.

David Carter, principal at Los Angeles-based Sports Business Group, said NHL owners will need to put some drastic measures in place to bring back fans and advertisers, including cutting ticket prices and ad rates. Even then it could take years for the NHL to return to the status it had with fans prior to the lockout.

"The NHL needs to have a revenue and marketing model that is measured in years," he said.

While other professional sporting leagues, including Major League Baseball and the Na-

but your promotions can also be more targeted now."

As one phase of his strategy, Mr. Robins says the game could tap into high-profile personalities who happen to be hockey fans, such as Jim Carrey, Mike Myers or Jerry Bruckheimer, to help promote hockey's strengths.

While hockey remains strong in Canadian market, the sport needs to be viewed as a new and emerging brand in many areas, Mr. Robins said. Specifically, he points to recent U.S. expansion cities such as Nashville, Atlanta and Carolina as areas where the NHL would benefit from a pro-