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# Need VIP

THE WALL STREET

# The Nosebleed VIPs

## Teams Give Upper-Deck Fans Courtside Service to Keep Season-Ticket Holders Happy

By ADAM THOMPSON  
East Rutherford, N.J.

**T**HE NEW JERSEY Nets have plied season-ticket holder Neil Kaplan with offers of autograph sessions for his kids, free tickets and even a chance to meet the team president. On this night, Brad Atkins, a Nets service representative, has stopped by during a game to stifle the breeze.

But this is no visit to a courtside high roller. Mr. Atkins has to trek into the corner of an upper deck of Continental Airlines Arena to find Mr. Kaplan's seats and add that personal touch.

“How can I tell him I'm not renewing next year? This guy's like my friend,” says Mr. Kaplan, who runs an employee-benefits business. Despite the team's losing record and the easy availability of individual-game tickets, he is paying roughly \$2,500 for a pair of tickets for next season.

That is exactly why so many teams in pro sports are extending unprecedented service beyond the Jack Nicholson and Spike Lees in the front row way up into the cheaper seats with the Neil Kaplans. Facing intensifying competition from other entertainment options, sports teams are under pressure to



Dan Vasconcellos

perennial successes like the Phoenix Suns are picking up on the trend, hiring Carrie Bligh from the posh Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa as director of account experience.

The phenomenon isn't confined to basketball. The National Football League's Philadelphia Eagles have nearly 200 concierges working premium-seating areas at Lincoln Financial Field on Sundays. Much of the service staff the National Hockey League's Boston Bruins employ on game nights are concierges.

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keep season-ticket holders—a major source of revenue—coming back. Several clubs have even hired specialists from the hospitality industry to devise special concierge programs.

A team like the Nets—mired in a dismal, isolated arena and hoping to move to Brooklyn in the next few years—always needs to try harder. To oversee its program, the National Basketball Association team hired a saleswoman, Dashawnda Brown, away from the Four Seasons Hotels Inc. chain. But even

# Teams Cater to Nosebleed VIPs

*Continued from the prior page*  
 at area hotels. And just last week, Major League Baseball's Houston Astros announced the hiring of Marty Price as their vice president of guest experiences. Within days of arriving, Mr. Price had run a three-hour focus group with 20 season-ticket holders. He says the customers didn't gripe about price but only asked for more services. He plans to add amenities such as inviting fans to watch batting practice.

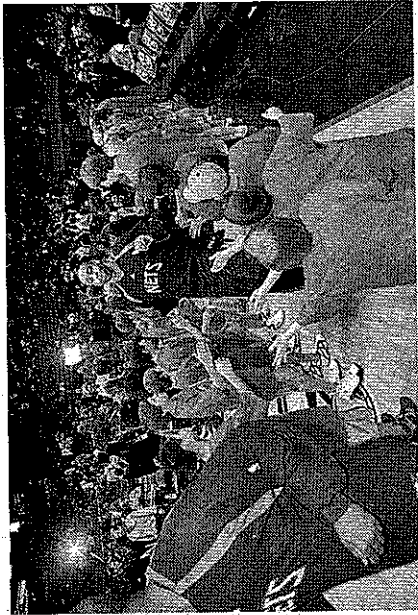
"Service definitely will differentiate teams and buildings from the competition if done properly," he says.

Season-ticket sales account for 70% of the Nets' revenue, estimates Tom Glick, the team's chief marketing officer. The team has 7,000 full-season tickets this year, up from 5,500 last year, at prices ranging from \$440 to \$77,000. And these prices don't include the money fans have to lay out for soft drinks, beer, hot dogs, programs and parking at every game.

Ms. Brown's job is to find inexpensive ways to make regular customers feel spe-

cial. That could mean something as simple as a tour of the locker room or as significant as the chance to vent frustrations to the home team's upper management. Teams are preferring closer track of their customers' preferences with computer databases that chart details down to the birthdays of their children.

The executives are "part concierge, part problem solver, part entrepreneur, part detective," says Liliahn Johnson, the



As a perk, kids of Nets season-ticket holders join the high-five line.

director of fan development for the NBA, who along with the league's vice president for business development, Chris Granger, joined from Walt Disney World in the past three years. There, Ms. Johnson says, "We were very intuitive with our customers. We knew them so well, we could anticipate what they wanted before they knew they were going to need it."

Mr. Glick says teams have always aimed to please their customers but in the past made less effort to differentiate between them. For instance, they might have treated those subscribers there for business the same as those there for pleasure. But teams are now turning to hotels to learn a more nuanced approach. Service employees of the NBA's Orlando Magic now receive training from Ritz-Carlton Co., and the hotel chain also runs the high-end club in the team's arena. The NFL's Eagles say they have sent staff for training with Ritz-Carlton, Walt Disney Co., Dale Carnegie & Associates Inc. and Marriott International Inc.

Chekktan Dev, an associate professor at Cornell University's School of Hotel Ad-

ministration, sees this as part of a larger move to incorporate service-industry philosophies across the business spectrum. Paraphrasing restaurateur Danny Meyer, Prof. Dev says in an email, "Service is something that happens to you; hospitality is something that happens for you. This then is the new frontier for any business that involves people."

In New Jersey, Ms. Brown can barely keep track of the game on most nights as she lopes up and down the arena stairs in high heels. Mark Bergman, a longtime season-ticket holder from North Woodmere, N.Y., who owns a wholesale produce business, raves about the job she has done. Even for a road date in Philadelphia, the Nets helped arrange for him to secure a luxury box and a bus stocked with food to get to and from the game.

Despite seats in the upper level behind the basket, Dave Lasky of Springfield, N.J., was enjoying a free dinner in the Nets' Winners Club. Because she knew he was an operations manager at an indoor sports facility, Ms. Brown had offered him the chance to watch arena workers transform the floor from ice rink to basketball court after a New Jersey Devils hockey game earlier in the day. But a mix-up had prevented anyone from letting Mr. Lasky into the building. Ms. Brown tried to make amends with the complimentary meal.

Mr. Lasky, a first-year ticket holder, called himself impressed by the service, saying, "Everything about the season tickets is good—except for the play."

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major source several clubs in the hospital concierge profession.



C5	J.P. Morgan Chase	A9/B6	Sun-Times Media Group	B4
C6	Jarden	B3	SV Investment Partners	B6
C7	KeyCorp	R6	Swiss Reinsurance	C3
C8	Kohlberg Kravis Roberts	B6	Symex	B6
C9	KSB Group	A1/A10	Synta Pharmaceuticals	C5
C10	Lady of America	A2	Texas Pacific Group	A8
C11	...	A9	Texas Instruments	C1