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Firm sells across smaller universities, conferences

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THE LEFTON
REPORT
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We've witnessed some years of a roiling college sports landscape that's included massive conference shifts and defections. At the same time, we've seen and noted acquisition and consolidation within the marketing agencies serving those institutions.

On the marketing side, the catalyst for many of the biggest deals completed across the college landscape from leading commercial practitioners such as **Learfield** and **WME-IMG** is that it's still problematic buying across college properties. The college demo remains attractive, since it's where many lifelong brand habits are born and because of the broad appeal of universities, which is not entirely dependent on athletic performance.

Even with one of the best NCAA men's basketball championship games in recent memory to remind us of how glorious college sports can be, we're of the opinion that a better way in for brands is still needed.

Accordingly, a plan to aggregate and sell athletic rights across smaller colleges and universities, in stealth mode until now, makes sense to us. Just as the power conferences have been consolidating schools and markets, and agencies have been consolidating college rights (and each other), former Westwood One sports executive **Michael Schreck** has been painstakingly piecing together a network of D-II and D-III conferences and schools against which he'll sell a network of traditional and digital media and marketing rights.

So far, Schreck's **Collegiate Sports Management Group** has deals with the East Coast Conference, Peach Belt Conference and Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference, which represents more than 183,000 students across almost 40 D-II schools.

Another three conferences have signed letters of intent to join the consortium.

"As I was doing deals for Westwood with Learfield and others, I just kept thinking there had to be opportunities within D-II and D-III," Schreck said. "And as digital and social media got more important, I became more convinced."

Some of his lead selling points include the absence of clutter and the presence of bona fide student athletes.

For the schools and conferences that sign on to a tiered revenue-share model with CSMG, it's an opportunity to sell largely undervalued assets and gain advice from a sales force likely to be more experienced and better connected than their own.

"It's a lot like the NBA's TMBO model," Schreck said. "Along with the benefits of having a network to sell against, we can teach schools about new sponsorship and media models like an OTT network."

Of course, any network sale is only as valuable as its sponsors. Schreck says he's close to deals in the beverage, insurance and consumer packaged-goods categories, which are being offered a combination of on-site assets, digital, electronic and social media. Schreck hopes to have deals completed by the start of the next school year this fall.

He is based in New York City, with a handful of staffers to date.

The biggest challenge, appropriately enough, is the learning curve. "We're doing a lot of education," he said, "but as you know, colleges are run by committees."

> SHIPPING INCLUDED: Market leader **Carnival Cruise Line** has inked its third sponsorship with an NFL club, signing a multiyear deal with the Houston Texans that makes it the team's "Official Cruise Line." The deal supports the relocation of the 1,002-foot Carnival Breeze ship from Miami to Galveston, Texas. Initial activation will be a contest through which moms can win a chance to join a Mother's Day brunch on the ship along with Texans wide receiver **DeAndre Hopkins** and linebacker **Brian Cushing**.

"We have a high level of brand recognition, so this is about building a positive association between our brand and borrowing some equity from consumers' sports passion points," said **Stephanie Evans-Greene**, Carnival Cruise Line's vice president of marketing. "There's still a small percentage of Americans who have ever cruised, so this is a way to get their attention."



The deal includes signage and other media, but Carnival also is planning some events/experiential marketing outside of the stadium.

Carnival signed a New Orleans Saints sponsorship in 2013 and followed that with a Dallas Cowboys deal in 2014, before the Texans hookup. **Royal Caribbean**, after Carnival the second-biggest cruise line in the world, sponsors the Tampa Bay Lightning and New York Yankees, and its parent company sponsored the halftime show for Super Bowl XXXII, teaming both its RCL and Celebrity Cruises brands.

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