

Interview

The NASCAR Experience

An Interview with Brian Z. France,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, NASCAR



Brian Z. France

EDITORS' NOTE Brian France, actively involved in NASCAR for more than two decades, is a member of the NASCAR-founding France family and assumed his current roles in October 2003. France has an extensive background in NASCAR, ranging from managing a race track, helping develop and manage NASCAR weekly short track and touring competitive levels, creating NASCAR's truck series, and forging its multi-billion dollar TV deal. In 1999, the SportsBusiness Daily named France its Sports Industrialist of the Year, and previously he was named one of Advertising Age's "top 100 marketers of the year." In 2006, he was named to the Broadcasting & Cable Hall of Fame. France serves on many boards and is the Founder and Chairman of NASCAR's Diversity Council.

COMPANY BRIEF The Daytona Beach, Florida-based National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, Inc. (NASCAR; www.nascar.com), which celebrated 60 years in 2008, is the sanctioning body for one of North America's premier sports. NASCAR is the number-one spectator sport, holding 17 of the top 20 highest-attended sporting events in the U.S., and is the number two-rated regular season sport on television. NASCAR races are broadcast in more than 150 countries and in more than 30 languages. NASCAR fans are the most brand-loyal in all of sports, and as a result, more Fortune 500 companies participate in NASCAR than any other sport. NASCAR consists of three national series: the NASCAR Sprint Cup

Series, NASCAR Nationwide Series, and NASCAR Camping World Truck Series, as well with four regional series, one local grassroots series, and two international series. NASCAR sanctions more than 1,200 races at 100 tracks in more than 30 U.S. states, Canada, and Mexico.

How is the NASCAR brand weathering the tough economic conditions, and how has the business model you put in place helped NASCAR remain strong?

NASCAR is not immune to the down economy. Many of our fans are either losing their jobs or nervous that they might. The big companies drawn to NASCAR are challenged like never before. That said, NASCAR is a lifestyle experience. Our fans are incredibly loyal – to the sport and its sponsors – and they're coming to the track. This year, we'll have approximately 30 events drawing 100,000 or more fans. We're trying to make these events as accessible and value-oriented as we can, while providing the most value to sponsors. Even in a tough economy, there are 400 sponsors in the sport, because the platform drives their business objectives. The good news is the NASCAR business model is flexible and takes into account elements that need to be addressed in a bad economy, such as getting the team costs down. For instance, we suspended testing and will save \$30 or \$40 million for the industry with that one policy decision. The new car we introduced is safer and more competitive. It was also a cost containment project to help reduce team costs, which we are seeing. We're accelerating a lot of things in our business model that will help lower costs in the assumption the economy will continue to be difficult for the foreseeable future. But we've got a great product on the track; the drivers have a strong public image and put on a show with close and competitive racing, which is our bread and butter. And NASCAR fans are the most loyal in sports. So we'll weather the storm.

Do you see opportunities to expand your target market and fan base?

Yes, and I believe that's our opportunity; building our audience over time is going to be key for us. Our challenge is this sport needs to be more diverse throughout its makeup of stakeholders, participants, and fans. We're doing a number of things from a multicultural standpoint on and off the track to achieve that. Over time, that's going to be a big opportunity

for NASCAR. In the meantime, we have an awfully strong and loyal audience that is the most gender-neutral audience in sports.

There is a focus today on going green. Is the environment a focus for NASCAR?

It is. I recently chaired a conference with our industry on this topic, with Al Gore giving an overview. We have studied the issue pretty hard and have hired an expert in the field to marshal our industry's resources and mobilize fans. We're planning a comprehensive approach when thinking about the energy footprint of events with 150,000 fans along with the drivers, teams, and owners. We want to find a way to be an environmental leader in motor sports, as well as in sports in general. There are lots of little things we can and will do, and we want to develop a comprehensive strategy for our whole industry. It should be a big opportunity.

Have you been happy with the talent you've been able to attract and retain for NASCAR?

The past 10 years, we've been able to recruit side by side with anybody to attract the best and brightest talents. The opportunity at NASCAR will continue to be such that the best talent wants to be here. This is a very specialized sport. So whether it's digital media where we have 100 people working, developing licensing opportunities, officiating events, or marketing and publicizing the sport, these specialized areas require people who are best in their fields. Fortunately, the NASCAR opportunity matches the expectations of people looking for a great career offering the opportunity to make a big contribution.

What do you think those who have worked closely with you at NASCAR would say it was like to work with and for you?

I think they would say they had a lot of fun while still being focused on important projects. People spend a long time with us – hopefully their whole career – and while many of the projects we work on are very serious, we try to laugh and have fun and have good relationships with the people helping build a sport and a business. This is a third-generation family business that's still ultimately about relationships. I think they'd also say they had an opportunity to give their opinion along the way, weigh in, have real responsibility, contribute in a meaningful way, and get to really run something – we're big on that. ●