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Queen City agenda

Sponsor move a winner for Belk Bowl



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The onslaught of college football bowl games comes to a close Monday night, but organizers at the Belk Bowl already have set their sights on next season.

Last week, Charlotte's bowl game enjoyed a strong rebound after a disappointing 2010 that included record-low attendance and a deficit of \$539,000. Enter local retailer Belk as title sponsor, bringing the advertising muscle of a regional department-store chain, along with considerable ambition. Ticket sales topped 58,000, up from 41,000 in 2010, the last year of the Meineke Car Care sponsorship (the company has since affixed its name to a college game in Houston).

As happy as Belk is with the gains, the company sees plenty of room for improvement. "Our aspiration is to take the game to a sellout in the next year or two," says [Jon Pollack](#), Belk executive vice president.

Pollack points to the Chick-fil-A Bowl in Atlanta as the model for non-Bowl Championship Series games, which is pretty much everybody other than the Rose, Sugar, Orange and Fiesta. The Atlanta game has sold out for 15 consecutive years.

Local organizers say the strong showing for the Belk Bowl on the heels of the sold-out Atlantic Coast Conference championship earlier in December proves Charlotte can support two major college games each year. Charlotte Collegiate Football, a nonprofit, manages both games. Last month, the ACC agreed to keep the football championship here for two more years, through 2013. The 2011 game, the second to be hosted by Charlotte, sold out faster than any of the six previous ACC championships.

Belk created a fan festival for the bowl game, bringing in Edwin McCain and Daughtry for free concerts near the stadium. Pollack wants to make that surrounding event bigger next December. The retailer also pulled off a nifty tie-in combining its main business, the holiday season and the players from N.C. State and Louisville by hosting a shopping spree for the two teams. Each player received a \$400 gift card to buy clothes and other gifts for themselves and their families, the kind of feel-good promotion companies crave in sponsorships.

The company also hosted 600 people at the game, a combination of clients and employees. Response has been positive, Pollack says.

Belk is committed to the bowl through 2013 and plans on being part of the game for years to come.

[Will Webb](#), executive director at Charlotte Collegiate Football, says Belk's involvement helped create a great atmosphere for the game. It also helped the bottom line. Audited numbers aren't in, but Webb anticipates enough of a profit to chip away at some of the losses incurred in 2010. The bowl and the ACC Championship generate a combined \$31.5 million in annual economic impact, the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority estimates.

ACC Commissioner John Swofford has already said he wants to keep the conference tied to the bowl game, a perfect bookend to the conference championship played earlier in December. Whether the Big East remains affiliated with the game is a tougher question, in part because of reshuffling among member schools. ESPN, which has TV rights, and the Carolina Panthers, owners of the stadium, also must agree to a contract extension.

All of which leaves Pollack and Belk huddling up. "We want to make this experience one of the best" for a bowl game, he says. "We're looking at the entire bowl week."