

# What Is Our Air Broadband?

Just as the Air Jordan brand catapulted Nike to new heights in the shoe industry, broadband providers need to embrace big, innovative, unique ideas to stand out from the crowd in the MDU world.

By Bryan J. Rader / Pavlov Media

In the early 1980s, the sneaker wars were heating up between Nike, Reebok, Adidas and Converse. Nike controlled the track market; Reebok was considered the aerobic shoe. Adidas and Converse owned soccer and basketball, respectively.

Nike needed to catch up. In fact, in 1984, it was No. 2 in the U.S., behind Reebok in total sales. It had to decide what to do. Phil Knight, who founded Nike in 1964 and took the company public in 1980, was still CEO. He was interested in the basketball market but fearful he couldn't steal share from Converse, which controlled it with NBA All-Stars Magic Johnson and Larry Bird at the time.

"How can we compete with these guys?" he was thinking. Plus, he saw the basketball market as very limited. Kids laced up basketball shoes only when they played. They would never wear them off the court.

In 1984, Nike decided its basketball budget was \$250,000, and it would sign five NBA players who would wear and sponsor Nike's new basketball shoes. Enter Sonny Vaccaro, part salesman, brand marketer, corporate sponsor expert, and, most important, innovative visionary. He said Nike was misreading the market by targeting rookie players with small sponsorship funds. He said, "Think bigger."

Vaccaro's vision was to move all of Nike's chips to the middle of the table, sign only one great player, and then develop a basketball shoe specifically around him. That player was Michael Jordan.

Vaccaro's vision was to create a custom-made shoe for Michael Jordan, using the Chicago Bulls' red and black color scheme. "Every kid will want these shoes and save up the money they make at the mall to buy them," Vaccaro said.

Well, you probably know the rest of the story. Nike branded that new "Air Jordan" shoe and sold more than \$162 million in the first year, crushing Converse and Adidas. Today, the Air Jordan brand generates \$5 billion a year in revenue for Nike.

What is the message for independent broadband providers? Should we be lacing up and getting into the sneaker business? No.

## CALLING FOR OVERSIZED IDEAS

Thinking like Sonny Vaccaro could ignite an industry focused on fiber construction and gigabit speeds. Look, we in the broadband industry have our modern-day Adidas and Converse to worry about (Big Cable). We have Reebok start-ups trying to capture a share of the MDU world.

Maybe it's time for the broadband industry to look for an innovative, outside-the-box, big idea similar to Air Jordan. Our business is ripe for product innovation and fresh ideas.

In the early 1980s, Nike played it safe and looked for ways to grow international sales in the track and field market. The company successfully built a long-term franchise by pivoting to a new frontier and unleashing its product innovation coupled with creative marketing.

## STANDING OUT

So, what would "Air Broadband" look like today?

What "big-idea basketball shoe" could catapult the broadband industry's sector of the MDU industry? When I look around the market today, I see a lot of growth and success. It is driven by an interest in the industry's core Wi-Fi services, just as Nike track products were in the early 1980s.

But to maintain this momentum, we must look for our Michael Jordan shoe. We must reengage innovation, uniqueness and product development in the culture of our sector. It's time to move our chips to the middle of the table. This is how we will continue to beat Converse, Adidas and Reebok over time.

So let's "just do it!" 🏆



*Bryan Rader is the president of MDU for Pavlov Media. His monthly column won an American Society of Business Press Editors (ASBPE) Central Regional Azbee Award.*