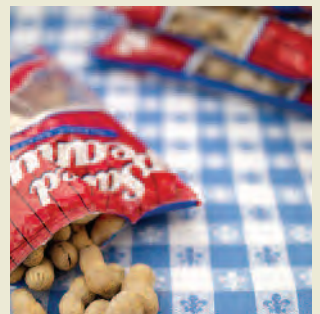


PUBLISHER'S PICK



1954

Born in Milwaukee, Wis.



A young Rick Abramson getting his start in vending in Milwaukee; Abramson, COO of Delaware North, with Dennis Szefer, strategic advisor and former CAO at Busch Stadium in St. Louis; "buy me some peanuts and crackerjacks" comes true with Sportservice; Delaware North merchandise operation at Busch Stadium where it provides concessions, retail and fine dining services.

Delaware North's Rick Abramson: Custodian of the Culture

Stories by LINDA DECKARD

1969

First job as food vendor at Milwaukee County Stadium

1970

Moved from vending popcorn to selling novelties



1973

Took cut in pay to become management

1974

Worked at the World's Fair in Spokane, Wash., for half a year

1974

Created Stadium Secret Sauce for Milwaukee Brewers baseball games



1975

Named general manager of the Curtis Hix Convention Center in Tampa, Fla.

1983

Married wife, Sylvia, whom he met at Tampa Convention Center. They have two daughters.

From Vendor to COO

Rick Abramson's passions are family, Delaware North, sports, food and excellence



From creating Secret Stadium Sauce to Taste of the City concept tours, Rick Abramson's passion for food is a given.

His contributions to the industry over 47 years at Delaware North, first as a teenage vendor at the old Milwaukee County Stadium to his current role as COO and executive VP of the Buffalo, N.Y., hospitality company go far beyond the concessions side of the business. Those who know him best cite his passion for the business and the firm, his ingenuity, his people skills and his management style (he calls it 'management by walking around') as reasons Abramson is a standout.

"Great choice," said Mark Lamping, president, Jacksonville (Fla.) Jaguars, when told Abramson is the 2016 *Venues Today* Publisher's Pick, joining the ranks of such gamechangers in this industry as family show producers like the Feld family, sports and venue impresarios like the Leiweke brothers and promoters like the Beckers of Pace Entertainment fame.

Delaware North's Lou Jacobs, of the founding family, calls Abramson the "custodian of the culture" of the hospitality company. He keeps the firm on course. "It's blocking and tackling, the fundamentals. We can get too

caught up in strategic thinking and forget the fundamentals and Rick is a constant voice reminding us of that," Jacobs said.

Every associate interviewed lauded Abramson's passion for the business and the firm. He has reached a pinnacle as COO and executive vice president, Delaware North, a promotion announced in March of 2015. But his lifelong career in the business is about excellence in motion. It's about friends, innovations, improvements and changes he's made along the way.

"My life is about steps and trying to achieve. When I was a vendor all I wanted to do was sell programs because that was big money. When I became a program seller I wanted to sell novelties. Then I went to college and went into management, which everyone does when they get older, but of course I took a cut in pay," Abramson begins his life story.

He started at the old Milwaukee County Stadium as a popcorn vendor for Sportservice. The business runs in his blood, with several in his family formerly or still in the concessions business. Abramson loves the ballpark and the concessions business, and he has ambition. From the get-go, he intended to be president of Sportservice, and he was.

"Rick's an ingenious guy," said Dennis Szeffel, former chief administrative office and

still a strategic advisor to Delaware North. "He has a great innate sense of ingenuity. You think, I wish I had thought of that."

Then he adds that Abramson predates him by a year or two with Delaware North "because I didn't lie about my age on my application. When he started as a vendor in Milwaukee, you had to be 16 to start working. He was 14. I tell him that's still grounds for termination."

Jacobs recalls Abramson stepping up 22 years ago when Sportservice needed someone to integrate a new acquisition, Australia Venue Services Catering, into the Delaware North family. Abramson relocated to Melbourne while Jacobs moved to Sydney.

"Rick was helicoptered in to be CEO (in Melbourne) and I was responsible for the parent company in Sydney. His ability to go in and duplicate the Sportservice Delaware North culture and values, not by telling people what to do but by walking the walk, was essential," Jacobs said. He recalled how line employees marveled when Abramson picked up trash and jumped behind concessions stands to expedite lines to facilitate customer service at the company's first Australia Open.

"That's a culture driver," Jacobs said. "The fabric of the business there is very much

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ROBBIE'S PICK

1993

Served as president Australian Venue Services (AVS) in Melbourne, Australia, for Delaware North

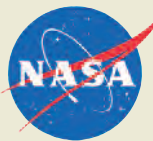


1996

Named president and COO of Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, initiating a \$130-million redevelopment

2002

Awarded the NASA Public Service Medal



2002

Earned the Dr. Kurt H. Debus Award from the National Space Club Florida Committee for his role in educating and inspiring the visitor complex's millions of guests.

2004

Named president of Delaware North Sportservice

**“Rick has passion for the business like no one else. And he has a passion for the company. It defines his personality.”
— Jim Houser**



RICK ABRAMSON ON HOW TO SUCCEED AT DELAWARE NORTH

When indoctrinating new employees or counseling existing staff, Rick Abramson, COO, has some basic advice on how to succeed at Delaware North:

“I tell them there are three things you have to do in this company; it’s a three-legged stool, and it doesn’t work on two legs,” Abramson said.

1. You have to satisfy your customer/client. Whether it’s the person through the turnstile or the client, they are giving you the opportunity to have the contract. You have to make sure they are happy. They have to be satisfied they have the right company – Delaware North. The customer walking in the door let’s you know how we’re doing at every event.
2. You need to protect the company’s assets, from pencils on the desk to money in the safe but, most importantly, you have to protect our people, our associates, by making certain they’re working in a great work environment. You have to be conscious of putting the right people in the right place and treating them the right way.
3. Plan. We do a budget. We do a plan. You have to hit those.
If you do those three things on a yearly basis, you, too, can go from a vendor to COO.

FROM VENDOR TO COO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43

like Delaware North here at home now. Geographically it couldn’t be further away and more different, but he transformed it.”

He was next tapped to run Kennedy Space Center in Florida for the company’s parks and resorts division.

Szefel was starting up that division and Kennedy Space Center was the first big account. He recalled the actual center itself was pretty pedestrian, almost like a static museum despite the excitement of the country’s adventure in space. Abramson was brought in to run it, helping introduce elements such as the Saturn V Center, and, working with NASA, “turned it into a world class place to learn the story of man’s exploration in space,” Szefel said. “He’s still revered down there, over 20 years later.”

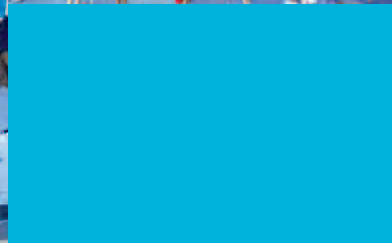
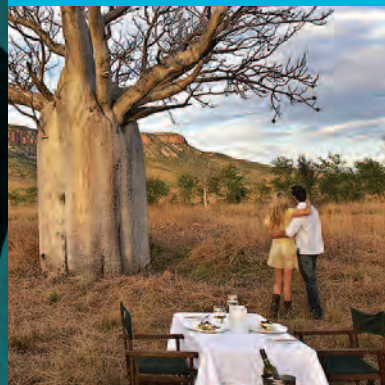
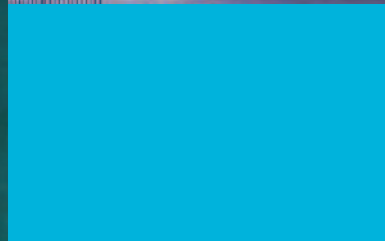
And then he became president of Sportservice, Delaware North’s concessions division. Abramson has always had a passion for ballparks. “I liked being there,” Abramson declared.

“He brought a passion for food that drove the extent of offerings further than ever,” said Barry Freilicher, Delaware North Sr. VP of Business Development. “He created venue and region specific products. At Target Field [Minneapolis], he manifested his vision with local products. We got a bus and took the client and did a food tour of the city. Then we created items around that.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46 →

“My first impression of Rick? That this guy needs a sedative.” — Mark Lamping, Jacksonville Jaguars

Congratulations Rick.



Delaware North congratulates Rick Abramson for being honored as the 2016 Venues Today Publisher's Pick. We are extremely proud of Rick's vision, passion and dedication to our company and the hospitality industry around the world.



**Delaware
North** SM

2008

Expanded retail operation with stores such as Chicago Sports Depot outside U.S. Cellular Field



2009

Instituted Taste of the City tours, beginning with the Minnesota Twins for Target Field

2013

Named Executive Chairman - Australia and Asia, President - Parks and Resorts

“Rick is a culture perpetuator. He perpetuates the culture of our business and keeps us very grounded as to the importance of the basics of our business.” — Lou Jacobs

MENTOR AS MENTEE: WHAT ABRAMSON HAS LEARNED

There is no typical day for Rick Abramson at Delaware North except, perhaps, Monday, when he meets with the chairman, Jeremy Jacobs, and division presidents.

He finds meeting with the chairman, among his mentors and a most intuitive executive, is “like sitting in on an executive program at Harvard” where he is challenged with questions for which he has to find the answer.

His first mentors, his father and mother, taught him the value of hard work. “My father always had two or three jobs. He was always trying to provide for the family. It’s always about the family. In my heart, I’m doing this for the family. Everyone wants their family to be in a better position than they are. You want every generation to take the next step,” Abramson said.

Bud Selig, commissioner emeritus of Major League Baseball, is a mentor. “I was working with Bud before he had a team.” He recalled one World Series where he was sandwiched between Selig and the chairman for a photo op. Selig commented he gave Abramson his start in the business in Milwaukee. Jacobs retorted, “But I had to work with him for the next 40 years.”

Dennis Szefer, former CAO, gave Abramson a big break when he put him in charge of Kennedy Space Center. “He was very strong in my development,” Abramson said.

Abramson will admit that when Delaware North first moved him from sports to parks in the reorganization prior to his current role, he was devastated. But then he realized Chuck Moran, president of Delaware North, and the Jacobs family had a plan. “They wanted me to grow my portfolio and make sure it was not just about sports. The success I had with parks helped them make the decision for me as COO. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself.”

He took the bull by the horns and honed the parks division into a moneymaking, efficient and growing subsidiary. Parks were doing okay, he added, but he wanted it to be extraordinary.

“There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction.”

“I would have been blessed to be regional VP of sports my whole life. I was at a pinnacle when Lou Jacobs asked me to go to Australia, but the Australia experience I wouldn’t have traded for the world.”

Maybe he had become too complacent, too comfortable, Abramson muses. “It was a shock at first, but heck it was a challenge.”

FROM VENDOR TO COO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

Jim Houser, president, Delaware North Parks & Resorts/Australia and Asia, concurs. “Rick invented the Taste of the City. He rented a minibus, put us and the client on it, and we’d start at 10 in the morning and eat until 7 at night. There are people who think that sounds fun. He picks out the places, all iconic, and they serve some phenomenal food.”

That was six years ago and is still relevant today. It is part of Abramson’s drive to create food destinations.

Abramson said the only thing that amazes him about his career is the people who have helped him — employees, clients, peers. For Abramson, it’s all about relationships. “To become COO of a \$3-billion company is remarkable for me.”

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“Outside of the Jacobs family, he is the best client relations person we have. He knows most of our clients and can deal with them well. He’s honest and straightforward. He’ll know their wife’s birthday, where their kids go to school. It comes naturally. He has terrific people skills.” — Dennis Szefer

CONGRATULATIONS
RICK ABRAMSON
2016 PUBLISHER'S PICK
HONORABLE RECIPIENT



FROM YOUR BIGGEST
FANS IN BOSTON



Delaware
North
Sportservice



2013

Mother, Joan, retires from her longtime post as concessionaire at Miller Park, Milwaukee



2015

Named COO and Executive Vice President of the \$3-billion, 100-year-old Delaware North



TRAVELING WITH RICK ABRAMSON

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SUIT

Decades of being a road warrior have added to the legend of Rick Abramson, COO of Delaware North. And it doesn't matter who outranks who, because Abramson has his own way of traveling.

Lou Jacobs, company co-CEO and a member of the founding family, recalled his most recent trip with Abramson.

"We were going to London because one of our clients, the New York Jets, were playing at Wembley Stadium, also a client. We also had a game that day at our other client, Emirates Stadium, home of Arsenal Football, and the Rugby World Cup was at the former Olympic Stadium outside of town. And Rick was hellbent that we were going to visit every stadium that day," Jacobs said.

They couldn't take a taxi or car because of crowds and security, so they took the Tube. "Picture two guys from Buffalo in the London subway trying to make it from one event to another. We didn't see any sports that weekend, but we saw each of our clients that day, let them know we were on it and we cared.

"At the end of the day, he had one of those fitness measurements that said he'd gone 12 miles. I was so mad. He shamed me into it."

Jacobs is amazed no one ever says, 'hey mister, you can't go there,' to Abramson. On opening day for Major League Baseball's Milwaukee Brewers, Abramson and Jacobs were in the club and Abramson decides the buffet is not up to Delaware North standards. He heads to the kitchen and brings the chefs out to see. They were not offended, because Abramson helped fix it. "He has that unassuming, unabashed willingness to roll up his sleeves and connect with the line personnel responsible. They couldn't have been more appreciative of his interest and his attention to detail. It's very contagious."

Jim Houser, president of Delaware North Parks & Resorts, has traveled extensively with Abramson and admits they are opposites. Houser believes in getting to the airport in plenty of time and not having to worry about making it on the plane. Abramson likes to think he can get through security in record time and, many times, he is the last person on the airplane. "He jokes that he sacrifices when he gets to the airport an hour and a half early with me. I think I'm doing him a favor; he doesn't miss the flight," Houser said.

On one trip from headquarters in Buffalo, N.Y., to Tampa, their flight was delayed on take-off and they arrived in Atlanta with just 10 minutes to get from Terminal E to Terminal T. Houser is taller and faster, but Abramson was keeping up until he got a phone call. He's talking on the phone and falling further and further behind. Houser is not going to miss that plane. When he got to the gate, they said get on now, we're leaving. He said my buddy is 100 yards back. He got on trusting Abramson would talk his way on, but he didn't. He had to take a later flight.

"Of course, he blamed it on the person who called. I wish I could be more like him; he doesn't worry about that kind of stuff," Houser said.

Dennis Szefer, former CAO and still strategic advisor, said Abramson was famous for bringing a steamer trunk on trips. "He would take three suits for each day. He also used to travel with a coffee maker. He'd take these big bulging bags," Szefer said.

"There is a uniqueness about him — maddening and endearing," said Szefer of his traveling companion.

"Rick is focused. He knows everything, not just the big things." — Brad Mayne, MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford, N.J.

FROM VENDOR TO COO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

THE JOURNEY TO THE TOP

Hard work and fiduciary judgment come naturally, and came young, to Abramson.

"I remember when I was a kid, a lot of guys would go out for New Year's Eve and have a date and go out for some high-priced dinner. I looked at it a different way.

"We used to work the Harlem Globetrotters in the Milwaukee Arena on New Year's Eve. I'd make \$100 there and it would have cost me \$50-\$100 for the dinner. So it was a \$150 night. I can't tell you how many New Year's Eves I spent with the Harlem Globetrotters."

Abramson was paid by the piece as a vendor and hard work paid off. When he went into management, "I probably made about the same amount of money but my hours doubled or tripled."

His first management gig was assistant manager at the ballpark in Milwaukee. Then he discovered if you wanted to work year-round, you had to travel, so he took time off from college and worked the racetrack in Detroit for Sportservice.

"It was very exciting for me. I was a kid from Milwaukee. My dad was one of those 15-miler guys. He went to school, got his first house and worked his whole life, all within 15 miles," Abramson recalled. The family owned a grocery store and didn't travel much, even for vacations.

After Detroit, he went to Chicago and then he worked the World's Fair in Spokane, Wash., in 1974. He went to work every day for six months. "I was within walking distance of the fairgrounds. My work was my hobby; my work was my passion. Everything wraps around work."

"He's still very involved," Houser said of the day to day even though Abramson is now

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50 →

THE BIGGEST STARS PLAY METLIFE STADIUM
CONGRATULATIONS TO ONE OF THEM,
DELAWARE NORTH'S OWN

Rick Abramson



“Rick is very passionate about what he does. He’s not dissuaded. He’s not going to let someone say you can’t do it. That’s not a good answer. Everything is doable.” — Barry Freilicher

FROM VENDOR TO COO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48
COO of the entire company. “If you have the passion he has, it’s hard to not get involved. He tries to take a bigger view but still gets into the day-to-day stuff. It’s good to have people that involved.”

Abramson wouldn’t necessarily recommend a passion for work as strong as his. “You have to find your own way in life. There are things I wish I would have done better. I don’t have regrets, but I wish I had done some things better. I didn’t get married until late in life because I was working and traveling. My wife was very patient. We dated for eight years. She’s been along for the ride. I’m not so sure she always enjoyed it as much as I did.”

Abramson and his wife, Sylvia, have two daughters and they’re both foodies, he said. “They both like to see concepts and take pictures and send them to me.” But neither is in

the business, one being in film, the other retail. “I steered them away from this. You want to make sure your kids are more than one dimensional,” Abramson said.

He well remembers dinner table talk back in Milwaukee, when most of his family was in the business, at least on a part time basis. “We’d have Sunday dinners and we were talking stadiums.” His mom, Joan, retired from working concession stands in Milwaukee only two years ago.

THE BUSINESS IS HOSPITALITY

Abramson’s career was about the ballpark, but now he thinks of his Sportservice days as “one concept in the food court and now I have the whole food court, so I can get my fill of ballpark if I want to, but I pay attention to our gaming business a lot because it’s a big part of our business, a big part of our future. I gravi-

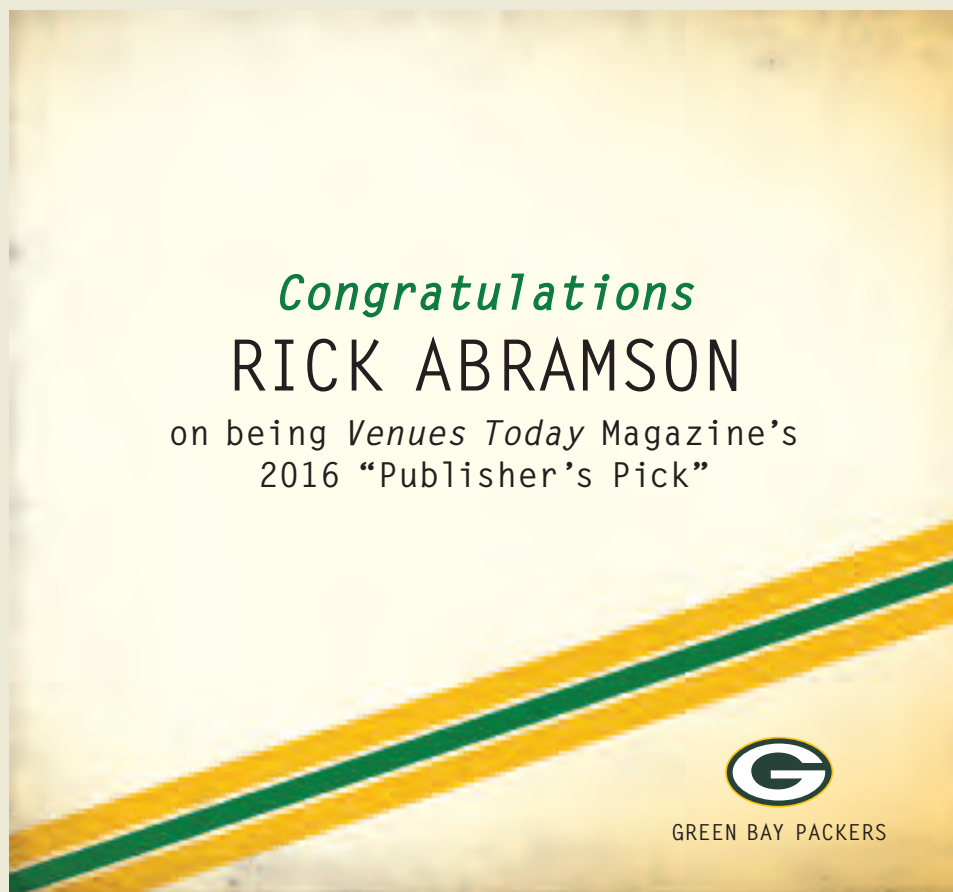
tate toward the venue business because that’s where I have most of my relationships, friends and experience.”

Developing great bonds with clients, bringing back the personal touch, is among Abramson’s oft-cited strengths.

“My first day coming to MetLife Stadium, Rick and Jerry Jacobs came in to congratulate me,” recalled Brad Mayne, CEO of that E. Rutherford, N.J., venue. “That’s the type of company Delaware North is, all the way to top. They want to do the right thing and be partners in the business as opposed to being a contractor.” Abramson personifies that trait.

Delaware North is in the hospitality business, Abramson points out. “Our platform is built on maintaining good relationships. We have very strong relationships. We aren’t trying to be the biggest in the world. We never

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“Outside of the Jacobs family, he is the best client relations person we have. He knows most of our clients and can deal with them well. He’s honest and straightforward. He’ll know their wife’s birthday, where their kids go to school. It comes naturally. He has terrific people skills.” — Dennis Szefel

CONGRATULATIONS TO RICK ABRAMSON

FOR VENUES TODAY'S 2016 "PUBLISHER'S PICK" FOR
YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO HOSPITALITY EXCELLENCE
FROM YOUR PARTNERS AT



PEPSICO



Tropicana.



Foodservice



“It’s not easy to have 70,000 people all wanting to eat and drink at the same time. So much of what we do is about execution and delivering. It’s about looking after our customers and Rick is nothing if not customercentric.” — Lou Jacobs

FROM VENDOR TO COO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50
wanted to. Business is based on relationships. Business is personal.”

Five years ago, Abramson told *Venues Today* that the biggest change in the business was premium seating.

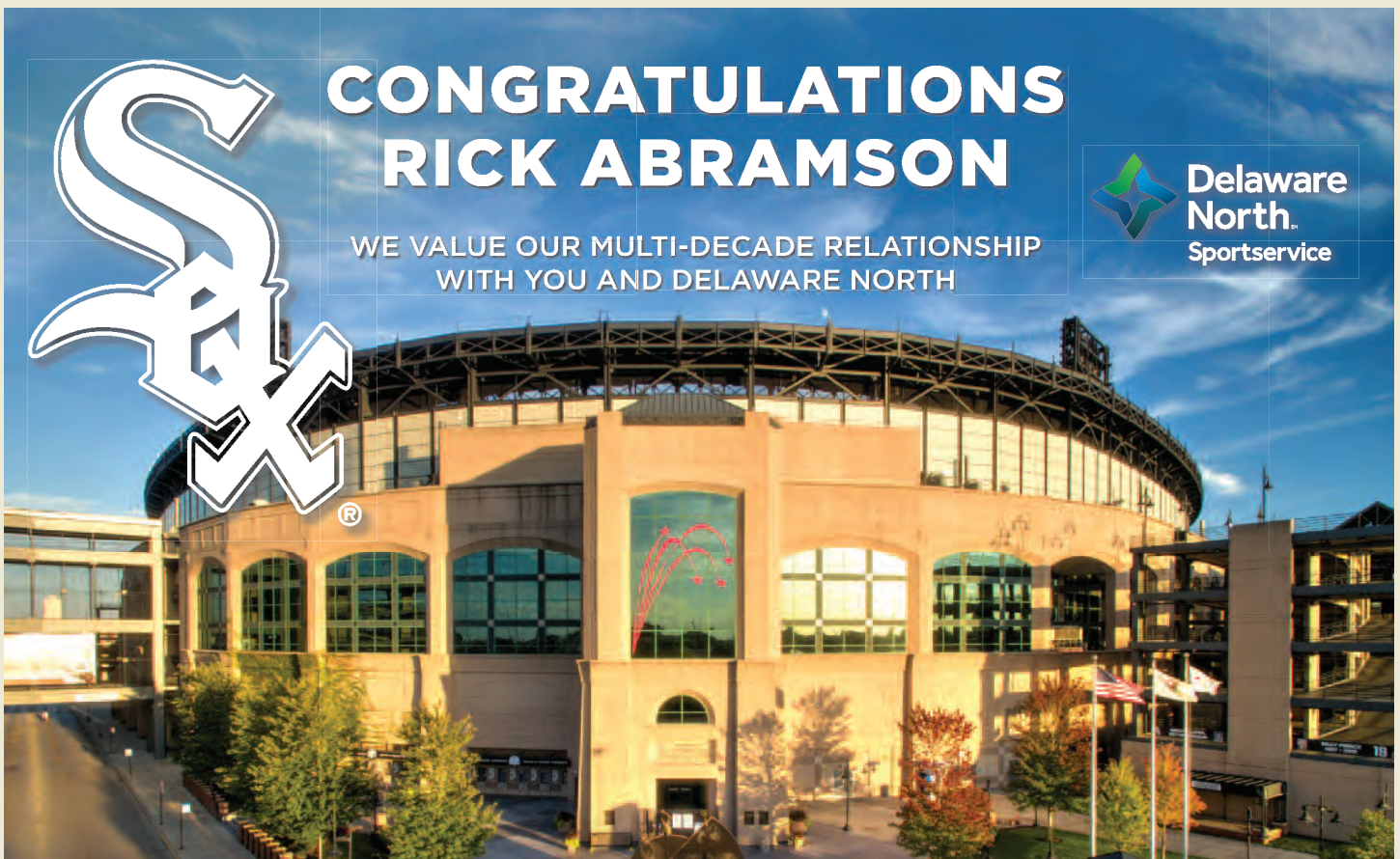
Today, he says it’s crafting for your customer — craft food, craft beer, craft location, craft experience. “You want to craft the experience for everyone who comes — the 20-year-old fan or the young father and mother with a child to his first game. Not every customer is

the same. You have to customize. We need to make unique experiences in our venues and around our venues.”

The subject is near and dear to his heart. Delaware North has an analytics department that can “slice and dice our customer,” discovering what they like, what they don’t like, what their habits are, where they go “so we have the right mix of products, pricing, and stands open. That’s a great part of our program,” Abramson said.

Analytics is not new, but it’s just evolving. He noted that 75 years ago, “the chairman’s father came up with a daily sales report, with everything from what the weather was, what the attendance was, what the turnstile was, ticket sales, who they played, how long the game was. He was using analytics, slicing and dicing, 75 years ago.”

CONTINUED ON **PAGE 54** →



**CONGRATULATIONS
RICK ABRAMSON**
on being named
PUBLISHERS PICK

*From Your Partners
at the Minnesota Twins*



THE *St. Louis Cardinals*
CONGRATULATE
Rick Abramson



ON HIS ACHIEVEMENTS AT DNC
AND BEING THE HONORABLE RECIPIENT
OF VENUESTODAY'S 2016 "PUBLISHER'S PICK"

DELAWARE NORTH, THE CINCINNATI REDS
AND ALL OF REDS COUNTRY CONGRATULATE DNC'S
RICK ABRAMSON
ON BEING SELECTED AS VENUES TODAY'S
2016 "PUBLISHER'S PICK."



Delaware
North™

