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ADVERTISING

## The Mets' New Marquee Name

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

Experts in the realms of sports marketing, corporate identity and brand building are offering sharply divergent views of the value of the huge deal that will name the new ballpark of the New York Mets for [Citigroup](#).

The agreement, announced formally yesterday, will label the Mets' new stadium, scheduled to open in spring 2009, Citi Field. The current ballpark, Shea Stadium, is named after William A. Shea, a lawyer who helped bring National League baseball back to New York after the Dodgers and Giants left for the West Coast.

To designate the new stadium Citi Field, Citigroup is agreeing to pay more than \$20 million a year for at least 20 years, published reports estimate, making the deal the most lucrative one in the United States for what is known as naming rights.

The experts, however, raised questions about whether New York baseball fans, famous — or notorious, depending upon your point of view — for their feisty opinions, will welcome a sponsored name or spurn it, complaining, “Shea it ain't so!”

Although corporate names have been familiar features of the sports landscape around the country, the Mets are becoming the first major team in New York in the big four sports (baseball, basketball, football, hockey) to name its home after a marketer.

“There are definite dangers,” said Andy Sernovitz, chief executive of an organization called the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, which seeks to help advertisers understand how consumer chat about a brand or product can affect sales and reputation.

“The risk of word-of-mouth backlash, especially among die-hard loyalists, is significant,” Mr. Sernovitz said, noting the novelty of the corporate naming for the New York sports market and the fact that “there are such historic, personal feelings about Shea Stadium and the name.”

“If it's ‘The Man has bought your stadium,’ it's hard to get warm feelings out of that,” Mr. Sernovitz said. He added that he would recommend that Citigroup offset that by trying to “show some respect” and that it acknowledge the potential pitfalls of the naming.

Among the steps that Mr. Sernovitz suggested Citigroup should consider were “a ceremony inviting people

to say goodbye to Shea” and “taking the old sign on tour, bringing it to Times Square” and other public gathering places.

Robert K. Passikoff, president at Brand Keys, a brand and customer loyalty research company in New York, also pointed out that “hard-core fans, whether it’s New York or San Diego, resent stadiums changing their names,” because “they feel it adulterates what they see as pure and clean and all-American” about baseball.

“You’ll have a portion of the consumer base that is going to be resentful,” Mr. Passikoff warned.

The Mets have played in Shea Stadium since 1964. Before that, they played for two seasons in the Polo Grounds, the former home of the New York Giants, while waiting for Shea to be completed.

The owners of the Mets, the Wilpon family, are replacing Shea with the new ballpark, being built next to Shea in Flushing, Queens, partly because of complaints that Shea is outdated.

“Mets fans, as much as they complain about Shea, have grown attached to the name,” said Jim Andrews, editorial director of IEG Sponsorship Report, a newsletter published in Chicago. So “there certainly will be some backlash” against Citi Field, he added.

A discussion about the name change on a sports blog, DeadSpin ([deadspin.com](http://deadspin.com)), reflected divided opinions among fans.

While several attacked the new name, not all the DeadSpin readers were upset, judging by some of their comments.

“I could care less about the name as long as the stadium has good sightlines,” wrote a reader who posted under the name Critic. “And beer.”

Another reader, posting under the name Brad Lee, joked that “the new musical theme for the Mets is ‘We Built This Citi.’ ”

Similarly, some experts said they saw positive aspects to the arrival of Citi Field onto the New York sports scene.

“Because it’s New York, and because Citigroup is such an enormous business in the New York area, it’s a perfect marriage for the New York Mets,” said David Bialek, president at the ANC Sports Marketing division of ANC Sports Enterprises in Purchase, N.Y.

As for the novelty of an advertiser’s name getting top billing in New York, “I think fans are accustomed to this type of commercialization,” Mr. Bialek said. “There no longer exists the anger or animosity that existed when these deals first began.”

In fact, “I would suggest Mets fans would look at the size of the deal with pride: ‘The Mets are deserving

of \$20 million a year,' ” Mr. Bialek said.

John Fraser, executive vice president at Element 79 Sports in Chicago, part of the Element 79 agency owned by the [Omnicom Group](#), said the fact that the marketer's name was being affixed to a new field may ameliorate any hard feelings about the disappearance of the Shea Stadium name.

“It's easier to get fans and media to use a name if it's a new entity,” Mr. Fraser said, adding, “If you're lucky, you can get a cool nickname like the Cell or the Bob.”

His references were to the diminutives that developed over time for the ballparks of two other baseball teams: U.S. Cellular Field in Chicago, home of the White Sox, and Bank One Ballpark, home of the Arizona Diamondbacks (now Chase Field because [J. P. Morgan Chase](#) acquired Bank One).

Bob Dorfman, executive vice president and creative director at Pickett Advertising in San Francisco, who tracks the value of professional athletes as endorsers, said: “Ten years ago, it was, ‘You're destroying the purity of the game.’ Now, they say, ‘We can afford more money to buy a better team.’ ”

“Certainly there will be die-hard Mets fans who will be up in arms” about the corporate name, he said, “but it would be more of a big deal if it were the Yankees.”

(For the record, the New York Yankees, also building a stadium to open in 2009, say they plan to reuse the Yankee Stadium name.)

At a news conference yesterday at Shea Stadium, Lewis B. Kaden, chief administrative officer at Citigroup, said the relationship with the Mets would extend beyond naming rights to other initiatives. He suggested that Citigroup might take advantage of the Mets' popularity in Latin America and Japan, where Citigroup has bank branches and issues credit cards.

Steven J. Freiberg, co-chairman of the Citigroup global consumer group, said the company could also use Citi Field as a showcase for new technologies like contactless payments, which enable shoppers to buy merchandise using specialized bank cards or payment tags.

(Anything to reduce the length of the beer lines.)

The naming deal comes as Citigroup is doing a lengthy review of its companywide brand strategy, looking at ways to unify its image; the review includes the well-known umbrella logo. Some posters depicting Citi Field at the news conference were missing the umbrella; others showed a red curve over the “Citi” part of “Citi Field.”

No decision about the future of the umbrella has been made, Mr. Freiberg said.

*Eric Dash contributed reporting.*

