The Cleveland Indians find themselves in first place, which would seem like good news except if your business is selling the Indians, then it's not. The Indians can't seem to gain any traction with the locals who are staying away in droves and that's got everyone inside the inner sanctum scurrying about sending tweets and generally acting frustrated.

I don't blame team president Mark Shapiro for taking a few subtle digs at the fact that virtually no one even knew that the Indians were playing a day/night doubleheader on Monday because of a make up for a previous rain out. It's an honest sentiment from a guy that usually keeps his real feelings well below the surface.

But neither, then, should Shapiro blame the fans who have greeted the Indians' early success in much the same manner as they did last season, with a confused and indifferent shrug.

What last season proved is that Shapiro and the baseball side of his operations weren't quite ready to embrace a successful team. They could hardly contain their surprise at how things went early on and then fretted about what they might do come late July when the trading deadline beckons. As sellers most seasons, the Indians' brass found themselves facing a public that assumed they'd sell once again even as the team made a mild push toward the playoffs.

In the end, Shapiro and Chris Antonetti weren't quite sure what to do and ended up giving up some of their best minor leaguers for Ubaldo Jimenez. Despite the currency used to pay for Jimenez, it was neither a transformative nor definitive transaction that said "we're here to win it this year."

Antonetti understandably wanted more then a rent-a-player but it's exactly those kinds of players that tell the fan base that the front office will be aggressive when the playoffs appear to be in reach. Jimenez always was a compromise candidate, someone with enough current credentials to perhaps convince a skeptical fan base of the front office's commitment to them but sporting a club-friendly contract.

So if Shapiro is frustrated with the fans for not showing up, he needs to keep it in context, this context specifically. The working business model he pushes is to have competitive teams but not necessarily successful ones. He knows he can't have playoff caliber teams on a yearly basis because he doesn't have access to the payroll to support it. He thus tries for decent teams that occasionally can make a run—his words, not mine.

I'm not here at the moment to question this model (I've done plenty of that previously) but I am here to throw that model back in Shapiro's face when he bitches about why the team can't attract fans, corporate or otherwise.

Fans love to see winning baseball, certainly, but they want to see winning baseball with a purpose and not one that wins around 80 games a year. It's hard to put your money down repeatedly for a team that you feel will abandon you just when it gets interesting. Whether or not it's true, and I'll allow for reasonable debate over whether the Jimenez deal represented abandonment or commitment, the larger point is that the fans believe it's true.

That's where the marketing of this team is almost completely disconnected to the perceived fan experience and ultimately another reason fans can't see themselves investing money into the club on a regular basis.

What Don Draper has taught us all is that people tend to buy products on emotion, because they feel a connection to it. Marketing built around capturing the emotional experience drives sales, if you capture the right emotion. But marketing that is tone deaf works counter to purpose. The Indians' current campaign, a carryover of the "What if?" theme of a year ago is tone deaf.

Listening to the excited calls of Tom Hamilton and watching Indians of 15 or so years ago perform great feats is meant to evoke a sense of nostalgia about the team generally. That's nice as far as it goes but it is irrelevant to the way the Indians are currently run.

The Indians of 1995 and 1997 were star driven teams funded by an owner who was willing to put cash into the operations and maintain one of the larger budgets in the league. The current owners work in an entirely different fashion.

The Indians of recent vintage aren't star driven in any sense of the word. It's a revolving door of young players, aging, flawed vets on one year contracts and bargain basement pitchers that aren't much known outside of the tri-state area. Fans rarely have time to get to know these players because they're either eventually released or traded but always replaced. Antonetti cobbles together almost an entire team each off season like someone playing fantasy baseball. The holdovers are those tethered to the team by a lack of options under the league's collective bargaining agreement.

Fans sees this. They absorb it and it just becomes a part of the very fabric of the franchise. I was in the Indians team shop at Progressive Field recently with a teenager who isn't native to Cleveland but who wanted to buy a jersey. She asked two different clerks whose named jersey was the most popular. Not surprisingly, it was two different answers. When pressed, each admitted that no player was selling predominately more jerseys than any other.

That doesn't mean none of the players are popular with the jersey-buying public. It's more that no player is particularly popular. Fans have various favorites but there's no one around whom their interest coalesces.

Given this paradigm, the marketing challenges are obvious.

Alas, I'm not Don Draper, so marketing the Indians to me is like marketing Heinz baked beans. It isn't glamorous. Maybe it takes a Meagen Draper to discover the right approach, but there is an approach. But whatever that may be I'm sure at least that it's not one that pivots off of a time where the team was a star-driven enterprise populated with the likes of Kenny Lofton, Omar Vizquel, Manny Ramirez, Carlos Baerga, Albert Belle or Jim Thome. All that does is remind people of the vast differences between then and now which in turn evokes more negative

feelings than positive ones.

The problem the Indians face on the marketing side is very similar to that of a number of self-anointed small market clubs. You can bribe fans by giving away tchotchkes and the Indians do plenty of that. But the items are mostly cheap crap that clutter up a room until you have the good sense to give them a toss. You can bribe them with fireworks and the Indians do plenty of that as well. Indeed these are the some of the most popular dates on the calendar.

But none of that answers the vexing issue of a mid-week game in the spring, summer or fall. You have to find fans who actually want to spend money to attend a night game against Chicago in May and getting them misty about the 1995 team isn't going to do it.

Fans in Cleveland tend to label themselves as good fans, but it's a mostly vacuous phrase. What connotes a good fan from a bad one? Is it his willingness to pay to attend that Monday night game in May irrespective of how the team is otherwise performing? I think that's a little harsh. You can try to appeal to a fan's love of the sport but that only goes so far. Ultimately a team has to be successful or at the very minimum, perceived as successful. That's true everywhere including Cleveland, because the fans here really aren't any better or worse than those in any other city. They'll fully support a winner and will avoid a loser.

The answer to the problem that frustrates Shapiro is too long term for him to fully comprehend. But there's now enough empirical evidence over a number years to prove the point. Until the Indians are perceived as an aggressive franchise truly doing everything in its power to be a winner as opposed to being competitive, the fan reaction will remain muted irrespective of whatever early season success it might enjoy. No one wants to invest in a drifting enterprise and whether true or not, the Indians have cultivated an image of a franchise always building for another day.