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## This Week's News

### Alltel strategy in NASCAR aims to overcome limits

By **MICHAEL SMITH**  
Staff writer  
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It's safe to say that Samira Zebian, Alltel's director of sponsorship marketing, will be pulling for the underdogs in the NCAA Tournament. It's a role she knows well.

As the first-year chief of Alltel's sponsorship on Ryan Newman's No. 12 Dodge, Zebian went into the year knowing her company had limitations because of Sprint Nextel's position as title sponsor on NASCAR's Cup series.

Rather than butt heads with NASCAR's top partner, she centered a program on an online promotion, television advertising and driver appearances, which has kept Alltel out of the recent quagmire of turf wars over NASCAR exclusivity (Cingular-Sprint Nextel and Sunoco-Shell).



The "My Circle 500" promotion, which launched last month, already has generated more response than any of Alltel's football- or basketball-themed promotions, Zebian said. Specific numbers weren't available.

"We know we can't do the same things that some of those other brands are doing. We can't outspend them," said Zebian, whose company ranks fifth in the number of wireless customers. "So we're trying to deliver control to the consumer by making what we do accessible to all of the fans, not just those at the track."

The core of the program ties Alltel's sponsorship with its "My Circle" calling plan to create the "My Circle 500" online **sweepstakes**. GMR is Alltel's marketing agency of record.

First-prize winners will go to Charlotte on May 24-27 to race for \$500,000 as part of a race experience around the Coca-Cola 600.

Zebian wouldn't comment on Alltel's spending, but industry insiders say the program, including the sponsorship, could approach \$25 million for the year. Part of that will go toward a commercial this summer that incorporates Newman into Alltel's "My Circle" spots, in which Alltel's cool sales rep interacts with the geeky reps from the competition. Newman would be the first personality to be injected into the ads, which were conceived by Campbell-Ewald, Detroit.

"We can't be at the track, we can't title sponsor a race, and last year wasn't a very good year for Ryan," Zebian said. "If nobody is talking about you at the track, how do you get beyond that? It does force you to be a little more innovative."

Alltel is in its seventh full year as a Penske Racing sponsor.

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