

Chapter 27 The importance of social media in sport organizations

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“By definition, a “twitter” is a series of short, high-pitched calls or sounds. In the past five years, those brief bursts of noise have steadily increased in volume to significantly alter what was already a loud sporting landscape”

Kirs Shannon, NZ Herald – May 21, 2013

“The IOC actively encourages and supports athletes and other accredited persons at the Olympic Games to take part in social media and to post, blog and tweet their experiences.”

Sochi 2014 – IOC Social Media Guidelines

“Disseminating information digitally and promoting itself via social media are a centre piece of a five-year plan NASCAR has implemented in hopes of attracting a younger demographic to the sport”

Nate Ryan, USA Today – November 17, 2012

“Social Media offers better relationships, better fan engagement, alternate revenue streams and increased brand awareness”

Sean Walsh, Digital Football – March 8, 2012

Introduction

In 2013, sport comprised just 1% of television content, yet nearly half of all Tweets produced during that period were sport related (Nielsen 2014). Other social media is used extensively in conjunction with sport consumption as well. It is more important than ever for sport organizations and athletes to prioritise these platforms in an overall marketing strategy. SNSs have profoundly impacted how fans access information and interact with their favourite teams. Social media has enabled organizations across the sport industry to have an unfiltered voice in the marketplace. The majority of content is no longer vetted by journalists, editors or producers. Sport organizations have responded to this change by incorporating SNSs into their communications, promotion, and sponsorship strategy. As this relatively new communication platform evolves, it is important for those involved in the management and marketing of sport to understand some of the key issues that have arisen from the utilization of social media. In this chapter the reader will be introduced to various ways in which sport organizations use social media to build a brand, develop relationships with stakeholders, and market products and services.

The advent and proliferation of social media has altered the media landscape like never before. SNSs allow individuals to “(a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211). Social media users are simultaneously consumers and producers of media content (Mahan and McDaniel, 2006; Booth, 2010). Until the creation of SNSs, communication between sport organizations and fans was typically one way – either from fan to organization or organization to fan. The gate-keeping role of the media made it very difficult for sport consumers to gain an immediate connection with the producers of sport (Arsenault and Castells, 2008; Scott et al., 2012). SNSs enable sport organizations, athletes, and consumers to bypass the gate-keeping role of the media and “disseminate an unfiltered message” (Scott et al., 2012). The potential for sport organizations and athletes to connect with their fans through SNSs is a point of difference from traditional marketing methods because sport fans not only read content, but they also share it with their online network, and/or generate further messages (Bradley, 2010; cited in Williams and Chinn, 2010).

Research has shown that sport fans are particularly avid users of technology (Kelly, 2013). In fact, fans now express themselves and access information across multiple technology devices at the same time. For example, fans may follow their team on television while using their computer, tablet, or smartphone to view real-time statistics of the game or communicate with other fans watching the same contest. This is termed second-screen consumption and can often also include the use of SNSs such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The popularity of second-screen viewing and simultaneous engagement through social media, justifies the incorporation of SNSs into broader marketing strategy. Many sport fans no longer wait for the media to interpret what’s happened after the game. Social media allows sports fans to create their own narrative during the game, and share it with others.

Adapting SNSs into the overall marketing strategy of an organization or athlete is no easy task. Allocating sufficient resources to support a social media strategy is one challenge, whilst equipping employees with the skills to be confident and comfortable implementing the strategy is another. When organizations get past these and other barriers, social media can enhance brand equity by creating additional opportunities to connect with the sport consumer. In order to illustrate the contemporary importance of social media in sport organizations, a real-world example is needed.

The New Zealand Breakers are based in Auckland, NZ and are one of eight teams in the (Australasian) National Basketball League (NBL). The NBL was founded in 1979 and is the preeminent basketball league in Australia and New Zealand. The Breakers entered the league in 2003 and later won the league championship three seasons in a row (2011-2013). The authors’ have consulted with the Breakers on social media strategy in an on-going and multi-stage framework of inquiry and action.

Discussions in the remainder of the chapter are accompanied by practical examples that are reflective of the Breaker's social media strategy. The chapter is organised in three sections: 1) creating an online brand profile 2) relationship building and 3) leveraging engagement for benefit.

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize and explain the importance of social media in sport organizations
- Demonstrate an understanding of the various approaches used for developing and implementing social media marketing strategies
- Appreciate the importance of branding, marketing, and building relationships through social media

Case 1 – Creating an Online Brand Profile

Social media enables brands to post messages without influence from a third party, such as journalists, editors, and producers of media content. As a result, sport organizations can now produce their own content and publish online. The following post shows how the New Zealand Breakers are using Facebook to brand the organization, create a unique online profile and exploit the benefits of social media platforms to brand the organization. In the example below the New Zealand Breakers posted a video message featuring two of its players discussing their taller (known as the “bigs”) teammates. This message enables the organization to show its players’ personalities via a video posted to the team’s Facebook page.



Discussion question:

1. Using the example above, how does your favourite (sport) organization use its social media posts to give it a brand personality?

Tools for Analysis

The New Zealand Breakers have created and cultivated a brand image on social media. The team is able to show its players’ personalities, promote its marketing efforts, and engage fans on social media platforms. Aaker (2004: 91) suggested that organizations should “participat[e] in the emerging market niches that represent future growth”. With the growth of social media, sport organizations have an opportunity to create an online brand profile. Keller (2003) suggested that companies need to investigate the preferences of consumers, satisfaction and purchase behaviour of customers. As a result, sport teams should identify what product and services features are meaningful to its fans (or clients). Effective presentation of salient components of sport brands such as colours and logos can lead to competitive advantage and should be highlighted in any social media strategy (Keller, 2003).

Evans (2010) suggested that for effective online brand management, an organization needs to utilise social media effectively. Through various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Instagram, and many others, sport organizations can communicate in new and innovative ways with

consumers and enable companies to “gain maximum leverage in strengthening and building long-term relationships” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 435). Prior to the popularisation of social media, it was very difficult for individuals to communicate with their favourite sports team or athlete. Through the use of social media, fans are able to interact with their favourite brand, which was not possible in the past.

In order to build long-term relationships with consumers through social media, Shih (2011) suggests that organizations need to shift from a mass market approach to one in which an organization listens to its customers and engages customers in a more personal manner. Further, Shih highlighted the importance of brand authentication on social media platforms. For example, sport organizations are able to have a more human voice (Zimmerman, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the Los Angeles Kings National Hockey League account tweeted on 12 April 2012 “To everyone in Canada outside of BC [British Columbia], you’re welcome” when the Kings defeated the Vancouver Canucks in a playoff series. The Vancouver Canucks are disliked by many NHL fans; especially in Canada (Fong, 2012; Stockley, 2012). Thus, the LA Kings’ Tweet was quite timely in terms of connecting with other hockey fans who may have been cheering for the LA Kings to defeat the Canucks. The Kings’ brand benefitted from this heightened fan engagement through social media, as coverage of the tweet spilled into more mainstream media (Zimmerman, 2012).



Figure 1: Los Angeles Kings you’re welcome tweet

In the new age of social media, customers expect their favourite brands to engage them. As a result, organizations need to have an active voice to facilitate customer engagement online (Shih, 2011). Further, organizations can create additional marketing opportunities and expose followers to its products and services. At the beginning of the 2013-2014 NBL season, the NZ Breakers wanted to create a hashtag that it and its Twitter followers could use when discussing the team online. In our discussions with the marketing team, it was suggested that the Breakers post a tweet asking fans for input on the season’s hashtag – shown in Figure 2; rather than the marketing team creating the hashtag. As a result, the Breakers’ tweet was replied to many times and was frequently retweeted. The purpose of the suggestion tweet was to drive communication with the team and possible increase engagement amongst fans of the Breakers. Followers of the Breakers responded with many different hashtags and the team chose #breakernation as the official hashtag for the season. As a result, fans can follow the various discussions about the NZ Breakers online by searching for the #breakernation hashtag.



Figure 2: New Zealand Breakers hashtag suggestion tweet

Monitoring fans’ comments is fast and easy through social media. Therefore, a sport organization like the Breakers can respond to fans quickly, which has been identified as a key element to

building successful brands through online technologies (Shih, 2010). In the digital age, consumers expect a real-time response from a query that was made on social media. With the proliferation of mobile devices and Wi-Fi availability, customers are able to be online throughout the day. As a result, Evans (2010) suggests that social media branding efforts should be looked at from a “return on conversation” perspective rather than the older return on investment adage. Sport organizations need to invest in online customers by engaging in conversations and harnessing the power that its followers have to help an organization have success on social media (Evans, 2010). One of many drawbacks to social media is that responding to fans posts or moderating content on various social media platforms can be time consuming for under resourced organizations. Further, social media postings on a sports team’s game day must be in real time to have any engagement for fans. For example, the social media team of the Breakers have, in some instances, stayed up all night posting scores and highlights of games. In particular, when the Breakers play in Perth, which is five hours behind New Zealand time. Another issue for sport organizations to consider is how much (and how quickly) they respond to fans’ social media comments and feedback. Being responsive is important from a branding perspective, but it can consume significant organizational resources – particularly when things are not going well, because fans take to social media to voice their displeasure online (Dragon, 2013). As a result, social media marketers need to have a plan created for either ignoring or deflecting negative messages by fans.

This section has reviewed some of the new opportunities that organizations have to brand themselves through social media. Sport organizations are now able to humanise themselves in the online environment, respond to customer inquiries in real-time, and know what people are saying about the brand. Social media poses many new and unique business prospects.

Action Learning, Student Questions:

- Is bringing a brand to life through social media only possible in professional sport? What about non-profit / club sport? Athletes?
- What are the challenges that grassroots sport organizations face when using social media to build a brand?
- How can social media be different from other media in presenting brand associations?

Case 2 – Relationship Building

A photo of primary school students attending a November 2013 match was posted on the New Zealand Breakers' Facebook page. This is an example of the Breakers using social media to build relationships with fans. The students had been promised tickets to game three of the NBL Championship series during the previous season, but the game was not required because the Breakers won the first two games of the three game series. The strategy is that by bringing attention to this group of fans, the team hopes to foster relationships with both the fans who benefitted from this experience as well as those who were simply made aware of it through social media (this sentence is a bit confusing, reword?). Social media are uniquely suited to communicate messages of this type.

 NZ Breakers shared a link.
November 20

Remember Papatoetoe South School? Huge supporters of the SKYCITY Breakers who had never been to a game, we gave them tickets to the 3rd Grand Final last season which they didn't get to come to after the Championship was won in Perth. They finally got their chance last Friday – check out their experience Thanks to Campbell Live below.

Papatoetoe South School were part of over 1500 school kids and their families who got to experience SKYCITY Breakers game night at Vector Arena on Friday through our Hoop Dreams programme – giving kids and their families tickets, travel to the game on public transport and donating basketballs and coaching to the schools involved. If you would like to nominate a school to be involved in Hoop Dreams, or your company would like to sponsor a school, email hayden@nzbreakers.co.nz for more information.



Primary kids' first ever basketball game
www.3news.co.nz

Discussion question:

- What are some examples of key stakeholder relationships a sport organization can create and maintain through social media?

Tools for Analysis

So far, the use of social media to build brands has been explored. Sport managers can also use social media to build relationships with a variety of stakeholders. These stakeholders may include fans, athletes, other sport organizations or organizations outside sport. Building relationships with fans through social media is a common practice amongst sport organizations. Building relationships with other stakeholders is part of the broader sport marketing framework and is of strategic importance. There is also an opportunity for sport organizations to use social media to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy as well as foster sponsor relations. In this section, the focus is on the use of social media to build relationships.

Although social media embedded within marketing strategies is still a recent phenomenon in the sport industry, the use of relationship marketing strategies is not new. The concept of relationship marketing was first conceived in the service marketing field (Berry, 1983) but has also been discussed in the sport industry (e.g., Bee & Kahle, 2006). Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013) defined relationship marketing in the context of sport as “retaining customers through the achievement of long-term mutual satisfaction by businesses and their customers” (p. 120). Kim (2008) focused on quality in his exploration of relationship marketing. His findings supported the link between seven relationship-quality constructs (trust, commitment, satisfaction, love/liking, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity) and sport consumption behaviours (media consumption, purchase of licensed merchandise, and attendance). Kim’s findings justify sport managers’ attempts to strengthen relationships. Although not explicitly identified by Kim, there is the potential for social media to facilitate enhanced trust and reciprocity – key to building relationships. Stavros (2008) has advanced our understanding of relationship marketing in sport settings within the context of an increasingly sophisticated practicing environment. One component of the Breakers’ changing and increasingly sophisticated environment is social media.

A sport organization may attempt to build relationships by posting content related to another geographically proximal or related sport organization. This is common practice in the off-season when timely content may be scarce. For example the Breakers have “liked” the New Zealand Warriors on Facebook. The New Zealand Warriors are a professional rugby league team also based in Auckland. The strategy here is based on creating an overlap of fans. The Breakers also follow other New Zealand based sport organizations on Twitter. In the 2013 off-season, the Breakers marketed ticket sales to a Tall Blacks / Tall Ferns double header taking place in Auckland, which is shown in Figure 3. This was done for the purpose of building/maintaining a relationship with New Zealand Basketball – the National Sporting Organization for the sport and an important stakeholder of the Breakers.



Figure 3: New Zealand Breakers promoting national teams' ticket drive

An organization may also build relationships with organizations outside sport. This may be done through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework. CSR refers to initiatives related to an organization's responsibility beyond generating a financial surplus. One common example across the professional sports sector is teams visiting children's hospitals in an effort to raise awareness and lift spirits. Babiak (2010) is among many sport management scholars who have emphasized the opportunity for sport organizations to simultaneously work towards organizational and CSR objectives. Likewise, sponsors are an important stakeholder for sport organizations and with whom relationship quality is paramount. Social media can facilitate the creation and maintenance of relationships between sport organizations and external stakeholders – including charitable organizations and sponsors. Figure 4 illustrates a Facebook post that is reflective of the New Zealand Breakers efforts to build relationships with both a charitable organization (Salvation Army) and a sponsor (Crown Relocations). Fans, geographically proximal sport organizations, sponsors and charitable partners are just some of the stakeholders with whom a sport organization like the Breakers may use social media to build relationships.



Figure 4: New Zealand Breakers promotion with charitable organization

Action Learning, Student Questions:

- Think about an example of a sport organization using social media in a CSR initiative. Was it effective? Why or why not?
- How have you seen social media used to enhance trust and reciprocity amongst key stakeholders?

Case 3 – Leveraging Social Media Engagement

Contractual agreements with sponsors often include guaranteed social media activation, where the sponsors would like to leverage their relationship through the Breaker's social media platforms to engage New Zealand Breakers fans. Our research has shown that posting marketing messages from a sponsor generates limited engagement, whereas creating a link, such as an unique promotion between the sponsor and the Breakers can produce significant engagement in fans as measured by likes, comments and sharing behavior. The following example illustrates the marketing link between the New Zealand Breakers and its sponsor, Gatorade:



NZ Breakers
Liked · December 3

Courtesy of Gatorade New Zealand we've got the ultimate Christmas gift for a Breakers fan who has everything, one of only a handful of singlet's made to commemorate the world's fastest man's visit to our training facility last year, signed by Usain Bolt himself. All you need to do is tell us who your favourite SKYCITY Breakers player is and your favourite Gatorade Flavour to be in win this great prize. Get in fast, entries close at 9.58 tomorrow morning!

Like · Comment · Share



Discussion questions:

- Is social media a suitable platform for sport organizations to promote their product or endorse a sponsor? Why or why not?
- Are fans interested in social media messages related to sponsors, ticket announcements, price discounts, or competitions? Or do fans simply ignore these types of social media communication?
- How is consumer engagement generated through social media?

Tools for Analysis

Professional sport organizations, sporting leagues and athletes use social media as marketing and communication tools. Social media has been used as a platform to sell tickets, offer discounts, activate sponsorship, provide live game updates, share 'insider' pictures and videos, and converse with fans. The relatively low cost of social media is advantageous, especially for organizations with small budgets (Eagleman, 2013), which is perhaps one of the reasons social media has become mainstream. This section suggests online networks and meaningful online engagement with stakeholders are keys for sport organizations and athletes to use social media effectively.

Relationships built and maintained online with stakeholders are vital in order to generate an online community. One's online network determines the reach of online communications. The more extensive one's network, the more potential eyes there are to see an online message. The networks formed provide access to not only established relationships (i.e. fans, sponsors, and stakeholders) but also to friends of the established network, 'friend extensions'. The social network allows fans to promote the organizations' product as they use social media to communicate with their friends about their experiences at the game. This word-of-mouth selling has shown to be effective in building a brand and selling products (Coyle, 2010; Emmons, 2012). Facilitating engagement with stakeholders through social media, and subsequently benefiting from that engagement is important to maximizing the reach of online messages.

Research has shown meaningful fan engagement on social media can improve brand equity, increase ticket and merchandise sales, and heighten fan loyalty (Coyle, 2010; Ioakimidis, 2010). The challenge for marketers using social media is to produce content that generates this consumer engagement. Based on our preliminary research with the Breakers, direct marketing messages receive very limited engagement. However, when a marketing message is combined with a message about the team or an athlete, the fan engagement greatly increases. For example, a message including the final score of a game with a mention to buy tickets to the next home game has a greater consumer response and reach than simply making a direct marketing post to purchase tickets. The combination of the two types of messages is a strategy to create more leverage within social media postings.

A key stakeholder of sport organizations are the athletes that play for the team. The athletes are part of the organization's brand, yet they also represent their own image and brand. Sport organizations leverage benefit from athletes by linking to the athletes' online presence. Benefits of associating with athletes is to further build an online presence, foster online relationships, and generate a larger social network. Athletes use social media, particularly twitter, to promote themselves (Hambrick et al. 2010). Although the benefits of using social media for athletes are similar to those of sporting organization, athletes generate engagement with their fans differently. Athletes regularly promote themselves by providing information about their personal lives (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, et al. 2012). Often athletes describe daily activities, such as what they ate for dinner or announce their vacation destination. Personal posts are regularly combined with information about the athlete's sport life (Frederick et al. 2012). For example, Thomas Abercrombie's Tweets about playing PlayStation 4 (Figure 5) and recovering from training at the beach (Figure 6) are examples of effective content athletes post on social media. These posts are more personal and individual than that of sport organizations, enabling the athlete to connect with their fans.



Figure 5: Screenshot of videogame Tweet by Thomas Abercrombie



Figure 6: Picture of recovery session at the beach by Thomas Abercrombie

Activating sponsorship through social media is a domain that is becoming more prevalent for athletes and sport organizations. Linking sponsorship and social media is financially advantageous. Pegoraro (2010) suggests there is room for athletes to use social media as a platform for individual revenue generation through endorsement and sponsorship. The value of online social networks was previously discussed, so it should be no surprise sponsors desire access to the social media networks of those they sponsor. A key to successful activation is aligning social media messages with the wants of the social media consumer. For example, Daryl Corletto Tweeted images of sponsor products, Sci-MX protein powder (Figure 7) and Barkers clothing (Figure 8). Corletto's Tweets are activating sponsorship deals, but the messages are still relevant to Corletto's followers because the products relate to sport and everyday activity. The benefit of such posts may include fans becoming aware of the products and/or encourage product usage.



Figure 7: Sci-MX Tweet by Daryl Corletto



Figure 8: Tweet of Barkers Clothing by Daryl Corletto

The project the authors are conducting with the New Zealand Breakers has revealed a need to develop marketing strategies and practices to manage sponsors' social media desires and requirements. In the Breakers experience they have found sponsors often approach sponsorship activation with a quid pro quo mentality, where the sponsor pays for a specific number of social media posts. This type of arrangement can be detrimental to the sport organization and hinders effectiveness because of the importance to provide consumers with information with which they want to read. Simply posting a sponsor message to sport fans could clutter the consumer's social media feeds with unwanted messages while also interfering with the sport organization's brand. Marketers need to be creative when activating sponsorship messages to their fans, because of the importance to create a message that generates fan interaction. Social media packages, which include elements such as naming rights for final score posts, product placements in photos, and sponsor messages are being created to streamline expectations between the sponsor and the sport organization or figure, while also respecting the fan's social media space (Fisher, 2013). Social media sponsorship deals are another opportunity for sport teams and individuals to generate revenue, however, the fit of the sponsor and the messages must be relevant.

Action Learning, Student Questions:

- If you were a professional athlete, would you use social media to directly promote attendance to one of your competitions?
- How could an athlete use social media to successfully market the sporting event?
- Describe a social media posting you have recently seen that contains either a promotion or sales message. Did fans engage with the message?
- Did the marketing post encourage sport consumption? Explain why the message was or was not successful.

Conclusions

This chapter outlined three ways in which sport organizations use social media for branding purposes, to communicate with and to consumers, and to leverage engagement on these social networking platforms. It is important for sport organizations and sport managers to continue to be proactive in how social media is used to achieve a return on conversation through engagement with fans. Social media platforms are increasingly being used by sport organizations for online brand management through communicating directly with consumers. Sport organizations are able to directly

engage their consumers through the use of social media by having an active voice, which can help to facilitate consumer engagement. Further, social media can also be used to create relationships with key stakeholders, to implement CSR activities, and to foster sponsor relations. This chapter outlined how sport organizations can use social media posts for both profit oriented goals and to show charitable works. The third section of this chapter outlined several ways in which social media is used to meet communication and marketing goals. Successful social media branding and fan engagement can be highly profitable for the sport organization through increased sales of tickets and merchandise. Further, the branding of a team's athletes can be an important tool to leverage engagement with fans. Athletes represent the team and often on social media, they show insider content, such as pictures of what they are doing or eating that can enable fans to become more engaged with the athlete and/or team.

The challenge for sport organizations moving forward is to use social media tools and unlock their potential to strengthen relationships with fans and other stakeholders (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Whilst professional teams such as the Breakers have done well in this area, there is room for improvement and growth. This chapter has been built on an example from professional sport – the New Zealand Breakers. It is important to remember that social media are *and should be* used by other non-elite entities within the broader sport industry including non-profit and grassroots organizations.

Recommended websites and additional cases for Companion Website

List of NBL Teams social media accounts

<http://www.nbl.com.au/social-media>

Nike outscores Adidas at the social Olympics (London 2012)

<http://www.l2thinktank.com/nike-outscores-adidas-in-social-olympics/2012>

3 ways sport organizations use social media to increase fan loyalty

<http://socialbusiness.hootsuite.com/rs/hootsuitemediainc/images/3-ways-sports-organizations-use-social-media-to-increase-fan-loyalty.pdf>

The NBA and social media

<http://www.slideshare.net/AdamVincenzini/the-nba-and-social-media-a-case-study>

Year in sports media report: 2013

<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/reports/2014/year-in-the-sports-media-report-2013.html>

New Zealand Breakers Twitter account

<https://twitter.com/nzbreakers>

New Zealand Breakers players Twitter account:

- CJ Bruton <https://Twitter.com/cbj4real>
- Casey Frank <https://Twitter.com/kseefrank>
- Kerron Johnson <https://twitter.com/kjbbruin03>
- Daryl Corletto <https://twitter.com/DarylCorletto>
- Thomas Abercrombie <https://twitter.com/tomabo10>
- Mika Vukona <https://twitter.com/M1kaV>

New Zealand Breakers Facebook account

<https://www.facebook.com/nzbreakers>

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