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How sports franchises communicate via social media

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HOW SPORTS FRANCHISES COMMUNICATE VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

by

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University of Central Florida, 2013

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Advertising and Public Relations
in the Department of Communication
and in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Dr. W. Timothy Coombs

Abstract

The aim of the research is to evaluate how professional sport organizations communicate via social media and lay groundwork on how to effectively do so in the future. The research focuses on the history of social media and its involvement in sport, how it's used today, examples of effective communication and how it can eventually drive revenue for a sport franchise and build a stronger fan base at the same time.

Dedication

Thank you to my parents for always pushing, my brother, sister and sister-and-law for always joking, and my girlfriend for always listening. Also thanks to one of my co-workers at Orlando City SC for introducing me to the undergraduate thesis at the University of Central Florida.

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What is Social Media?

The goal of this paper is to establish the importance of using social media in a professional sport organization and, more importantly, showing its value in growing brands and engagement among fans.

Social media is a new facet to every sport organization. Over the past decade, social media has risen to new heights of relevance among Americans, with the average person logging on each day to a wide variety of content, including that of their favorite sport franchise. “The US alone has over 157 million Facebook users, with social networking accounting for 19% of all time spent online” (Faeth, 2012).

Sports fans, especially ones of a specific franchise, use social media to communicate, connect and market with others who are a fan of the same franchise on media such as Facebook and Twitter. “These sites, by their nature, allow the creation and wide transmission of content that fuels interaction, collaboration and community” (Sanderson, 2011, page 2).

The social medium, which has rapidly changed the way people look at sports, can be linked to the grandfather of communication media- the radio. The first true electronic medium to enter American’s households, radio let broadcasters paint pictures of major sporting events throughout the world thereby increasing engagement of every fan. In its short time, social media has accomplished similar tasks, giving even more behind the scenes information via updates on roster movement, photographs and video that would have never existed if not for social. It’s

unfair to completely compare the two, but both have played a major role in evolving sport and entertainment in the United States.

But what exactly is social media? Social media is a form of electronic user-generated content, whether it be through Facebook or another outlet. It's important to note that users are the ones who are generating the content, as that is the appealing part of social media for those who use it.

Social media platforms include Facebook and Twitter. For the purpose of this paper, we will only cover these two outlets.

Facebook

Facebook launched in February of 2004, and as of May 2012, the site has over 900 million users. With this powerful tool, people can share updates with each other, post photos of their vacations, join groups they're interested in and connect to organizations in completely new ways.

Based on an average day, 15% of Facebook users update their own status, 22% comment on another's post, 26% "like" on another user's content, and 31% log on to the site "several" times a day (Hampton, Sessions & Rainie, 2011). Along with that, 92% of people who are on a social networking site (SNS) are on Facebook. These numbers support the fact that Facebook is a highly active and interactive medium that has taken on a worldwide scope.

Twitter

Twitter, the other dominant social media platform, was created in July of 2006. The site now has well over 500 million users. The best way to describe the platform is texting via the internet- with it encouraging short, pointed updates. This type of mirco-blog setup, which requires the use of 140 characters or less, gets information out quickly to the national audience, with it also encouraging the rapid pace of notification on what's happening, who's doing what or anything in between.

Taking the conversation from a broad business perspective to one specific to sport, we must get a good feeling on what sport communication actually is. Sport communication is the study of communication that occurs between a franchise and fan(s). The sport communication field has been transformed through social media and specifically Twitter, as you can see with the following statistics. "67% of Twitter users are more likely to buy brands that they follow and 76% of Twitter users now post status updates, compared to just 47% in 2010" (Faeth, 2012). But why are these numbers important? It matters because that 67% are your dedicated followers and fans. Those are the fans who not only follow your social media outlets, but buy merchandise, tickets and more. These people are important to your brand and show that Twitter is a relevant platform to engage in with your fans.

The numbers show the growth of importance of social media in our daily lives. It's a market that's made sport franchises and their communication departments quickly adapt to a rapidly growing segment – the informed fan.

Numbers behind Social Media

The following are examples of social media becoming an everyday activity and just how many people use it.

- “Through one of the newer online activities the Pew Internet Project Studies, as of 2011, found that social networking sites are used by 65% of all internet users - half of American adults. Among internet users, we see a very strong correlation in use with age, as some 87% of internet users under 30 use these sites, compared with less than a third (29%) of those 65 and older” (Rainie, Lenhart & Smith, 2012, p.12).

How is it used?

“It is without question that the increase in digital media devices and the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) have enhanced the sport consumer experience significantly. It is also apparent that now, athletes, teams, leagues, sporting goods producers, sponsors and marketing agencies have the opportunity to capitalize on this phenomenon,” (SBRnet, 2012).

So how exactly is social media used? There’s no correct answer on how to employ a successful platform for a sports franchise, but we can see what the background is and where it may be headed.

One thing social media and media in general has done for the sporting world is connect the fan like to the sport franchise like never before. The medium creates demand on consistent updates from your favorite franchise because if they don’t provide updates *it becomes stale*. It also serves as an entryway that gets people involved with the brand to a point that hasn’t existed since social media came to relevance in the late 90s and early 2000s. “Media has become the most accessible entryway through which fans connect to sports” (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006, page 68).

It’s also worth noting that while social media has changed how sport organizations conduct business, it has also changed the way the fan engages with his/her favorite franchise. Fans can now comment on what they think on a franchise’s player movement, creating a negative or positive wave of judgment from the fan’s perspective for the team to receive on the platform. At Orlando City Soccer Club, we ran into that exact problem in the 2012 offseason.

After the soccer season concluded, we dealt with an interesting problem. Our coaching staff was about to release a fan-favorite player, who also connected to many people as his fiancée just passed away due to a hard struggle with cancer. The announcement of his release via our social media outlets came with outbursts of negative comments, ones that we had to take because with all of the positive social interaction we get- some negative can come our way as well. It is a balance that all sport business professionals must take head of when operating a platform such as Facebook and Twitter.

We also can see through research into social mediums that people are further engaging with each other when they go online and on social media sites.

“People are not hooked on gadgets-they are hooked on each other. When they go on the internet, they are not isolating themselves. They are conversing with each other” (Rainie, Wellman, 2012, page 7). Elaborating on the preceding quote further, we can see that people aren’t disengaging with each other like common belief has us think, but rather they are engaging in an entirely new way. “The social network operating system is personal” (Rainie, Wellman, 2012, page 7).

This idea fits in perfectly with what fans potentially want from a social media site and the brand they cherish. A fan is thought to “demonstrate particular behaviors: talking and reading about sports, watching sports and purchasing sports-related products” (James, 1997]. Without fans, a sport organization can not live.

So what do fans want from their favorite team’s social media outlets? Is it updates on their favorite players, pictures from practice or discount on merchandise? There’s no one correct

answer, but remaining relevant is the backbone of keeping your audience interested in your outlets. Trying out new ideas and executing them well is the best way to see how your audience responds.

Brand

But what truly is a brand? And more importantly, what is a sports brand? The definition is important to understand because it is an ever-changing product thanks to social media.

“A brand is a synthesis of facts and images that comprise a sports product and is often defined by slogans, themes, positions, symbols, product characteristics, and a number of other tangible and intangible attributes” (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006, page 97).

The benefits of having a strong brand include creating an emotional relationship between brand and fan, creating a product stronger than competition (which can be another sports team in the market, theme park, date night, movies, etc), and association of a positive product. A great example on a strong brand in today’s sporting world is that of Sporting Kansas City of Major League Soccer (MLS).

Following the 2010 season, the Kansas City Wizards went through a comprehensive rebranding process. The process transformed the Wizards to the European-sounding Sporting Kansas City, reinvigorating the brand and launching it toward the top of MLS. Sporting is now regarded as one of the most innovative and promising sport brands in the game of soccer in the U.S., constantly being referenced as one of the top clubs to aspire to be.

The recent announcement of the USL PRO/MLS agreement reinforced that point. Our club linked up with the Sporting brand- and not just for the on the field benefits. As an aspiring

Major League Soccer franchise, Orlando wanted to learn from Kansas City on how their business operates, taking notes on best practices. Orlando City President Phil Rawlins said of the relationship “We are excited to begin our partnership with one of the greatest MLS brands, Sporting KC.”

Social media is all about building your brand. How can you, the sports franchise, continue to keep fans engaged and build brand equity outside of the playing field? In the past it was done by big player signings, community event appearances, charity measures, etc. But remaining relevant can now be done on a daily basis via social media. If fans remain more engaged due to the efforts of the franchises’ social networking, it’s building the brand.

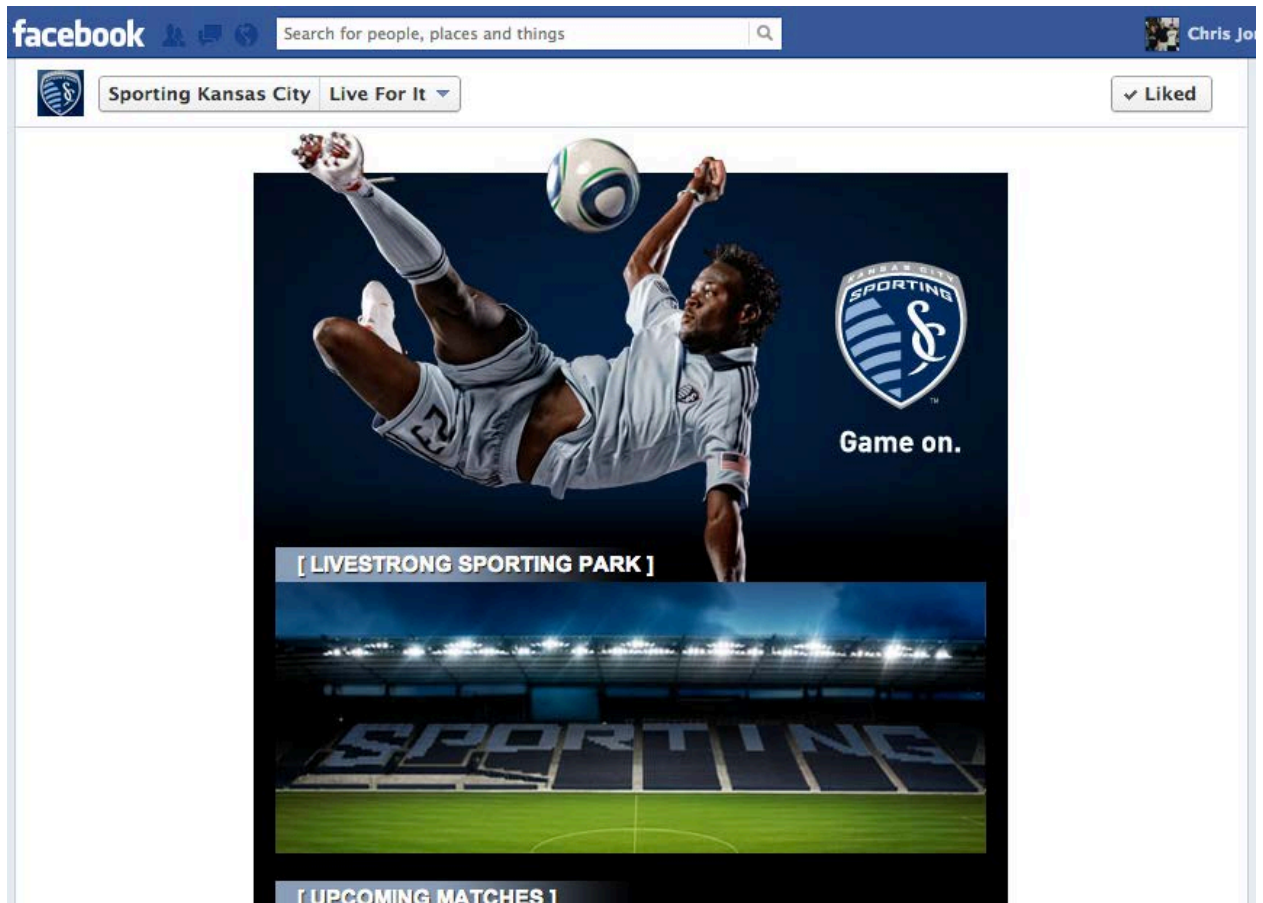


Figure 1

Figure 1: *Sporting Kansas City (SKC) of Major League Soccer (MLS) is a great example on how you can build your brand via social media. Reinventing themselves with a new crest and new stadium, SKC dedicated their social outlets to reflect the new brand with great successes. With 66,000 fans on Facebook and 43,000 followers on Twitter as of January 2013, SKC remains one of the most popular MLS social media outlets. (Sporting KC, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/SportingKC/app_193814637306829).*

Highlighting those specific aspects as defined is key to setting yourself a part in social media. For example, product characteristics is something set early on when a sports brand is born, either written in a brand guide or understood through years of a specific characteristic that stands as an identifier for the team. The Pittsburgh Steelers of the National Football League serve as a good model of this set of identifiers that can be highlighted on social media, with the franchise having the rough, gritty, intimidating and passionate fan base that is incredibly loyal

and mostly blue-collar. Recognizing this, the Steelers then can highlight this ideal through posts that reflect their certain brand that's been built over the past decades.

Behind the Scenes on Social Networking

How do social networks truly work, though? There are a few theories and ideas that explain what is currently occurring in the world of social media, including the triple revolution. An explanation can be found in the book *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. In Rainie and Wellman's book, they discussed the philosophy - which explains how social networks work.

The triple revolution explains three specific points on what social media is currently doing to networking online.

- “Provided opportunities and stresses for people to reach beyond the world of tight groups” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

This gives sports teams the opportunity to reach out to an entirely new group of fans they never had an opportunity to attract before social media. Fans can now completely dive into a setting where they are surrounded by others who think and feel the same way, and who also interact on a daily basis.

- Second, “Internet Revolution has given people communications power and information-gathering capacities that dwarf those of the past. It also allowed people to become their own publishers and broadcasters and created new methods for social networking” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Sport organizations can now tailor to specific, individual needs of a fan. The average fan can also now access more information than ever before, along with becoming more educated about the sport and the specific franchise/league. People can send direct messages to teams on their Facebook/Twitter or post on their wall/tweet and can get answers back within an hour. It's a new process that gives the fan power in the same space the sport organization operates in.

- Third, "Mobile Revolution has allowed ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to become body appendages, allowing people to access friends and information at will, wherever they go" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Every sports fan now has the opportunity to be engaged at a consistent level, no matter where they are in the world. Fans no longer have to wait until tomorrow's paper or the 6 o'clock newscast to get the breaking news, it's all available on their smart phone or tablet. "One-half of all Facebook users are using it on a mobile device, keeping connected wherever they go" (Hampton, Sessions & Rainie, 2011).

Gratification Theory

Another premise that coincides with sport in the social media world is the uses and gratification theory. This explains how people use media for their need and fulfillment. The theory suggests "Media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use" (Mass Communication Context, 2001). Applying it to sport communication, fans are the users who take an active part in the communication process. Having that basic knowledge is useful as it

shouldn't be underestimated that social media can be used as a listening tool for organizations. Fans can demand more pictures of a player, ideas on how the experience at home games can be better and more. It is them who drive the communication, and not taking note of their feedback is a misstep that no sport organization should make.

Fan Connection Points

And how are sports fans drawn to their favorite franchise? Dubbed fan connection points, these help fans “explain to certain sports products and choose one sport (and franchise) over another” (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006, page 56). The two main connecting points are star connectors and place. “A star connection can be to a player, manager, team, league, or any other potentially promotable sports industry product.” The second, place, defines the connection on “home town” teams. “Place connections capitalize on the presence of hometown teams, athletes, and facilities and instill in fans an allegiance to the sports that are from their area or represent the community” (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006, page 58).

What's the value of connection points? If you are beginning a new social media outlet with a new franchise, or even reimagining the way your franchise operates in social media, these two points are a good place to start. Star and place connections, two of the most vital connection a franchise can have to their fan base, are always a go-to for a specific campaign or even day-to-day operating of the sites. It's important to keep that in the back of your mind as you operate your outlet, because straying too far can alienate some (like posting/tweeting about something completely irrelevant to what your fans signed up/followed your page to see) users.

NFL and Social Networks

The most popular major leagues in the United States includes the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association, Major League Soccer, National Hockey League and Major League Baseball. Of these, the NFL is the most popular and, as such, has the most to gain/lose out of developing a social media strategy. But before policy is mentioned, a background on current statistics of the league is a good way to dissect how well the NFL is doing.

Here are some key facts about the league:

- “More than 247 million fans watched the NFL during the 2011 season” (Nielson Company, 2011).
- “The average audience for a regular season NFL game (in 2011) was 17.5 million” (Nielson Company, 2011).
- “The NFL is the most popular sport in America, and is No. 1 among teens, men and women” (ESPN Sports Poll, 2011).
- The NFL’s 17.5 million viewers are more than double NASCAR’s average and is more than four times the combined average of the NBA, MLB and NHL. The NFL has the most viewers in every demo segment. (Nielson Company, 2011).
- “The average NFL fan spends 12 hours, 55 minutes per week engaging with the NFL” (OTX Weekly Tracker, 2011).
- “The NFL leads in youth social media usage for news/stats from ages 12-29, outpacing all other major sport leagues in the United States” (Ipsos Weekly Fan Tracker, 2011).

- Key facts about the NFL were released on behalf of the Ipsos Weekly Fan Tracker, which took account of NFL fans ages 13-64 and their engagement levels with social media.

According to the study, the top reasons why NFL fans engage in social media include: staying informed with NFL news and information, interaction with others, comparing opinions on the NFL to those from other NFL fans, “meeting” fans from around the world and a way to show off knowledge of the league.

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In total, 36% of fans are engaged with the NFL through social media (NFL, 2012). That number will easily increase over the next few years as more and more fans engage with their favorite teams via social media. The 36% also spend a mean of 1.22 hours per week on NFL-related social media.

The most active and engaged segment among the study were season ticket holders, who have a staggering 76% engagement through social media. They also spend an average of 4.44 hours per week on NFL-related social media, showing the fact that the fans who are “diehard” also engage more on social media outlets.

Looking at a snapshot of the NFL from a demographic breakdown, you can also see that a majority of users fall in line with the age group that uses social media sites most, 18-34 year olds.

Football (NFL): Digital Market-Facebook - % by Age/Gender/HH Income/Logo Apparel Purchases

| Item | 2011 |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Number of followers - add 000 | 35,785 |
| % BY AGE GROUP | |
| 13-17 | 12.2 |
| 18-34 | 42.2 |
| 35-49 | 26.2 |
| 50-64 | 15.5 |
| 65+ | 3.8 |
| Total | 100.0 |
| % BY GENDER | |
| Male | 59.9 |
| Female | 40.1 |
| Total | 100.0 |
| % BY ANNUAL HH INCOME | |
| Under \$25,000 | 19.0 |
| \$25,000-\$49,999 | 24.1 |
| \$50,000-\$99,999 | 35.4 |
| \$100,000 or more | 21.5 |
| Total | 100.0 |
| LOGO APPAREL PURCHASES | |
| Expenditures (add 000) | \$1,469,274 |
| Average Expenditure Per Buyer | \$88.1 |
| Source: SBRnet | |

Figure 2

Figure 2: Broken down by age group, the National Football League has its greatest interaction among social networking sites by 18-34 year olds, a key market for all sport leagues in the U.S. (SBRNet, 2012, <http://www.sbrnet.com.ezproxy.lib.ucf.edu/pdf/Executive-Summary.pdf>).

What truly is fan engagement?

The biggest question that no one has been able to answer yet is this: can effective communication drive revenue for a sport franchise? The early answer is maybe, but indirectly social networking provides teams an outlet for fans to further identify with that specific brand – one that creates a more loyal fan who spreads the word about the franchise, buys tickets and merchandise, passes their enthusiasm to children, etc. This section focuses on that question and whether a strong social media platform can influence and drive fans to become a bigger source of revenue.

“The ability to create and distribute content is one of the more influential advantages that have contributed to the rise of one’s audience size varies, one only needs computer access or a mobile telephone to broadcast one’s thoughts for public consumption. Thus, social media enables people to become active, rather than passive, media consumers.” (Sanderson, 2011).

Engaging the consumer is a big reason on whether your outlets 1) are successful and 2) could potentially bring in revenue. Even though there’s no one way to define engagement, after running multiple outlets the general idea is to get a response from a consumer. There are levels, even ranking them may seem impressive to your superiors, to engagement – starting from low to high on Facebook. Likes are at the bottom rung, comments are next as they involve a conversation from fan to franchise, and shares along the same line as a post is now exposed to (x) amount of new people thanks to the sharing of the post.

A great example of engaging fans are in-game productions, like that of the Chicago Bulls (National Basketball Association). Below is a way to keep fans in the know during a game, increasing the amount of interaction.

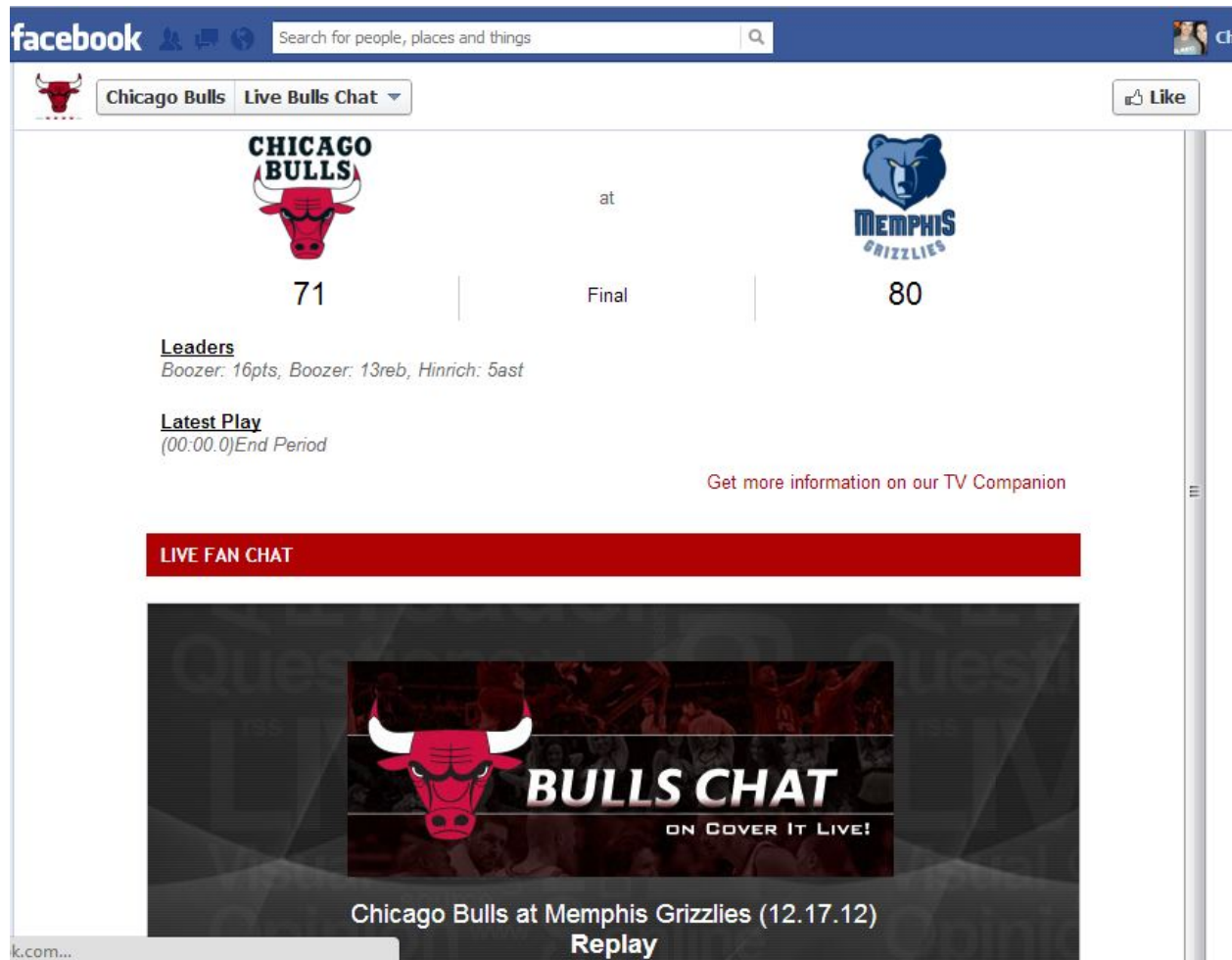


Figure 3

Figure 3: The Bulls use a common program that's integrated into many sport teams websites and/or social media called CoverItLive. This allows you to chat with fans in-game and, more importantly, drive traffic to your outlet. A common function, different CoverItLive programs are accessible for a fee but mainly do the same function of in-game chatter. (Chicago Bulls, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/chicagobulls/app_205350032822460).

So how would a CoverItLive function like the one that the Bulls and many professional sport organizations use increase engagement? Like that of many successful marketing campaigns,

activation is key in social media. With in-game chat as an example, you could be watching the game while conversing with other fans, a totally new idea that draws someone in even closer to the team. Combine that with minute-to-minute updates from Twitter and even behind-the-scenes from a platform like Instagram and you get an in-depth experience wherever you may be. In time, and with the right stability from the platform, fans would then be more in tune with their favorite franchise like never before.

Can Social Media Drive Revenue?

There are new media on which sport franchises can bring in revenue via social media. Recently, Facebook pages have been receptive to accepting sponsorship of certain initiatives done by the franchise. The trouble is to tie in those deals with a generic-feeling post. You don't want to have a post that has copy like "Do you LIKE the Ranger's 5-game winning streak? So does Pizza Hut! This post is brought to you by Pizza Hut, Make It Great!" Copy like that turns fans off. It needs to be organic.

A great example on the effective use of organic sponsorship is that of the Carolina Panthers, who's "Top Fans" page not only is one that brings in revenue from a third party, but also engages fans.

The image shows a Facebook page for the Carolina Panthers. At the top, there's a search bar and a 'Liked' button. Below that is a banner for 'TOP FANS' sponsored by Harris Teeter. A post from Carolina Panthers says 'Victory Monday! LIKE if your Mondays are always a little sweeter after a Panthers win!' with a photo of a player celebrating. To the right is a 'Panthers Fan Leaderboard' showing a list of fans and their like counts. Below the main post, there's a share from Mike Wheeler and another post from Carolina Panthers with a photo gallery.

| Rank | Fan Name | Count |
|------|-----------------------|-------|
| 1 | Scott Stewart | 363 |
| 2 | David Houck | 286 |
| 3 | Willie Workout | 280 |
| 4 | Mike Wheeler | 221 |
| 5 | Shirley Bruton Wright | 188 |
| 6 | Bridget Hines Null | 164 |
| 7 | Charles Lipscomb | 142 |
| 8 | Steve Amanda Conner | 140 |

Figure 4

Figure 4: The “Top Fans” leaderboard on NFL’s Carolina Panthers page is a great example on how to integrate sponsorship into social media correctly. Done correctly, sponsorship revenue can be made by subtly putting an advertiser in the correct place on a specific outlet. This one, done via GroSocial.com, gives fans a place to increase their place on the Panthers’ leaderboard allthwhile driving traffic for the franchise to then sell a spot to an advertiser like Harris Teeter. (Carolina Panthers, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/CarolinaPanthers/app_434472186601299).

The general idea behind the page is to rank fans based on the amount of times they mention the team in a post, share a photo, like a video, etc. The first big benefit of having of a page like the one above is to increase the amount of hits a specific post receives. In a rotator-like function,

fans wanting to be on the leader board can share with their friends. This in turn increases the amount of hits you receive on your page and also gets fans more exposed to all of the posts made by the team, a cycle perfectly suited for social media.

The sponsorship of “Top Fans,” Harris Teeter, could easily have paid the Panthers a good amount of money just to have their brand on the page. This example is where social may be headed, a sponsored page where fans congregate to share about their experiences with the team. Having pages like this increase the opportunity for corporate sponsorship, which in turn increases potential revenue earned thanks to social media pages.

Another example of a point system comes from the Baylor Bears, who have instituted a rewards program which functions similar to the Carolina Panthers “Top Fans” page on Facebook.



Figure 5

Figure 5: Baylor’s reward program also offers an example on what pages may move to in the future to drive revenue. Fans can gain points to eventually claim prizes by posting and tweeting about the Bears, with it all driving traffic to their site. (Baylor Bears, 2013, https://apps.facebook.com/baylorboldrewards/?fb_source=search&ref=ts&fref=ts).

The Baylor Bold Rewards Program works similar to the Panthers “Top Fans” page in that there is an incentive to engage in the team’s social media initiatives. If you were to Tweet with the hashtag #Baylorbears, you would receive 100 points toward a prize of your choosing. With no sponsorship, this page is squarely built for fan engagement. Though fan engagement via sport communication can be a paper by itself, this engagement exponentially leads to fans that are

more informed about the franchise and therefore become greater supporters. Outside of generating revenue, long-term engagement is what leads to a more informed fan base. That-15 year-old who follows your Facebook page can later on be turned into a season ticket holder via correct practices and remaining an engaging outlet. Following a sports franchise on Facebook and Twitter is a powerful tool, as posts now serve as reminders in fan's minds on what is happening, big team news and player signings. It's not necessarily measurable at this point in time, but in five or so years we'll be able to see if effective communication truly plays a role in the process.

But how much money can you really make on social media? The above two examples are great samples of where social may be heading, engagement pieces that tie in sponsorships. You can easily sponsor a page right now in a Facebook timeline cover or Twitter headline, but what benefit does that give you? Fans will no longer think of that specific outlet as natural or organic. When you go on a page, you don't expect to be bombarded with sponsorship or see posts that are clearly sent out for revenue driving reasons (ex: this post is brought to you by Pizza Hut). The best practice is to make a page that not only drives fans to see more of what you distribute, but to also sell sponsors that this is as organic as it gets on social media.

Methods to Successfully Connect With Fans Via Social Media

While there's no correct, step-by-step method to effectively implement social media for your sport organization, there are certain to-dos that everyone can learn from. The following resulted from the information gathered throughout the research of this paper.

Need to connect fans with the two "essential connectors"

Star power drives fans to the site, along with a sense of community from the hometown team. Creating visuals and linking articles about your fan-favorite players along with focusing on local events and stories will increase engagement among fans- and will also create some in the process.

Develop a voice

As an organization, you have to be a positive outlet for all your followers. This "voice" should not be mistaken for "opinion" but rather a unique communication style that is recognized by your fans and coincides with your goals as an organization. Whether there's a consistent way you "post" to Facebook or the way you respond to fan "tweets" – stick with a steady way you do this and people will grow with what you are trying to convey among the social medium.

Be visual

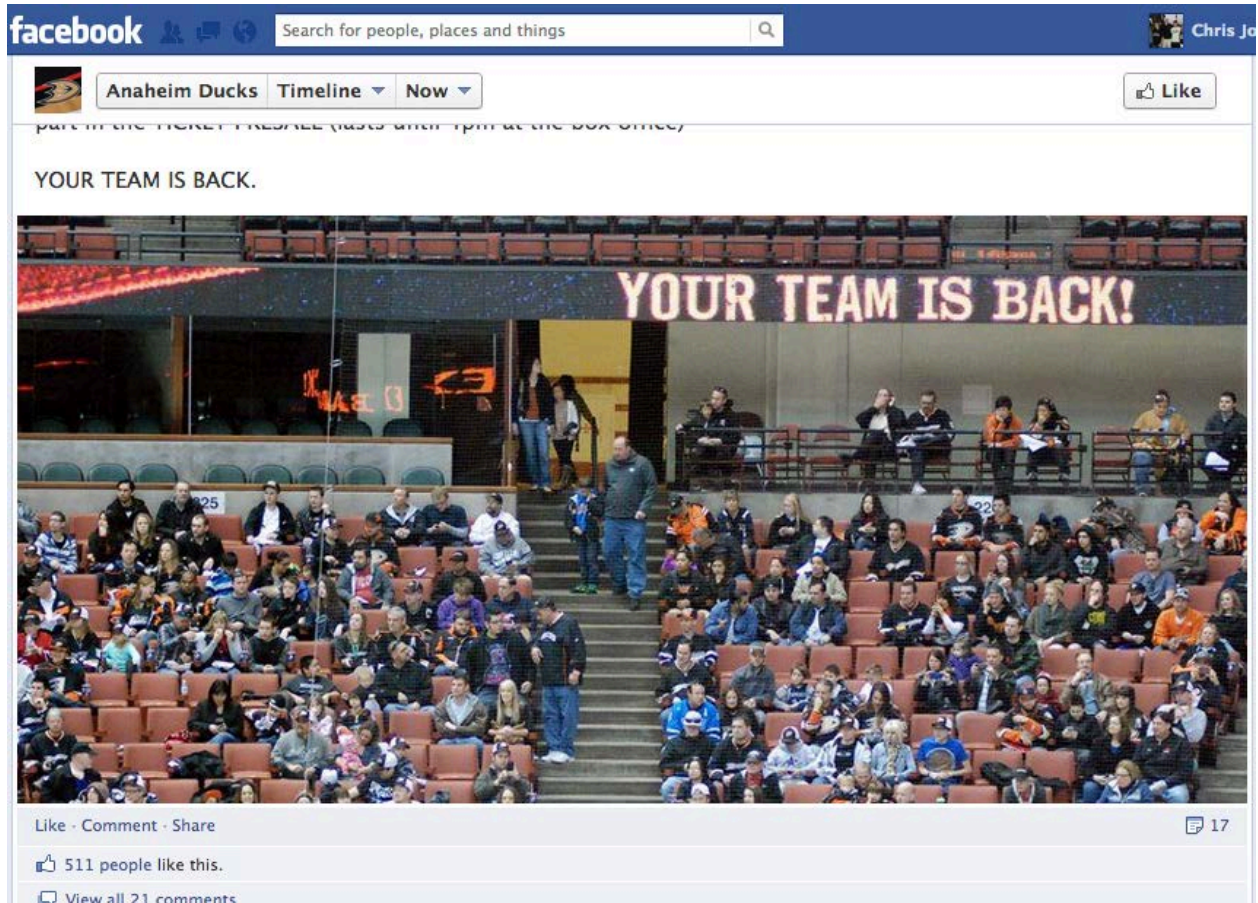


Figure 6

Figure 6: *The Anaheim Ducks of the National Hockey League capitalized on the lockout ending in early 2013 with key visual posts that encouraged fans to share and comment- increasing the virality of that post. (Anaheim Ducks, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/anaheimducks?ref=ts&fref=ts>)*

In an age where news clips have been shortened and articles are more like blog posts, visuals are key in every single post. Engagement rates are higher and these visuals demand attention to whatever you are driving people toward. According to Ipsos Weekly Fan Tracker, media postings (Video, Pics, Audio) are the most important content for Twitter and Facebook among people aged 12-29” (NFL, 2012).



Figure 7

Figure 7: Looking at the analytics of the page I operate, Orlando City SC, you can clearly see the difference in posts made with visuals compared to non-visual. Since starting a visual for every post in mid-November, our page receives more likes, fans, talking about, reach and subscribers each week. It's a simple tactic that makes a big difference in analyzing the analytics and, more importantly, presenting them to your superiors. (Orlando City SC, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/orlandocitysoccer?sk=page_insights).

Communicate with, but don't contradict your fans

They (your fans) may say some really questionable things, but you can't forget what you're representing. If a fan asks a question, answer it right back. But fans will want to come back if they know they're being engaged by the club, just not in a way that discourages them. There are certain situations that call for question, including the use of profanity, singling out a player and threatening them, etc.

Develop long-term equity

The goal of any sports franchise is to create an established fan base. Social media helps that cause by engaging fans in a medium where they can express their voice. Done properly and well-invested, social media can potentially create long-term equity for the club.

Grow the female brand

“SNS users are disproportionately female” (56%) (Pew Internet Study #2). Sports franchises not only have to tackle the issue of properly using social media, but not forgetting to tailor to the women on the space. It’s important to remember this fact as the gender has grown to relevance in the sporting world as well. How to integrate the female fan is up to the discretion of the specific team as different sports have different female fan bases, but remembering that fact is important as the percentage is continuing to grow in not just SNS but sport league fans as well.

Be organic in attracting sponsorship for revenue

As owners are increasingly turning to social media as a revenue generator, those responsible may turn and say it’s not doable, which no one wants to hear. Social media directors have to keep the balance of the organic feeling of their outlets while also opening up new opportunities for their sponsorship team to sell. The examples of Carolina and Baylor are a good launching platform on what is possible, with the amount of traffic on a daily basis worth a lot of money for sponsors looking for a target demographic.

Don't be afraid to explore new outlets

This paper focused on specifically Facebook and Twitter, but don't be afraid to always see what's coming around the corner. At Orlando City, we focus on the aforementioned two and Instagram, a photo social medium that gives sport franchises even more exposure to behind-the-scenes activity of your franchise.

Conclusion

After learning the baseline of what social media is, how it relates to sport communication and some guidelines on best practices, I hope that this paper can serve as a tool for teams to use in the future.

Remember to always listen to your fans. They are the ones who drive the content, so keep your ears open to suggestions on how to better their experience on your team's social media platforms. Whether that be more specifics on the team's roster, what's occurring in the fan zone or even saying happy birthday to a star player, having an open mind and being willing to try new things is key to having a successful run on social media. At the end of the day, it is the fan who matters most.

Quoting my dad's favorite go-to phrase, *the hard part is thinking about it (whatever tough challenge lies ahead). The easy part is doing it.*

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