

Who reads an organization's official weblog? The case of a Major League Baseball team

Stephen W. Dittmore, East Stroudsburg University

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Abstract 472**

Sport management scholars have emphasized the importance of developing positive relationships with key organizational publics as a central function of both public relations (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2006) and relationship marketing (Irwin, Sutton & McCarthy, 2002; Milne & McDonald, 1999; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) conceptualized one-way and two-way models of communications. Two-way sport communications models focus on give-and-take between a sport organization and its key publics (Pederson, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007; Stoldt et al., 2006; Stoldt, Pratt, & Dittmore, 2007). The two-way symmetrical model uses both research and dialogue to produce a dynamic relationship between an organization and its publics, resulting in public relations actions that are mutually acceptable (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Stoldt et al. (2006, p.26) emphasized the element of dialogue as "crucial to modern public relations as it places much more importance on practitioners as receivers of information rather than merely disseminators."

Organizational weblogs are forums for the exchange of information and commentary between an organization and its publics (Scoble & Israel, 2006). In this sense, a weblog meets Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of two-way public relations. And to the extent weblogs and subsequent exchanges result in an organization and a public establishing a mutually acceptable relationship, the tactic results in a symmetrical outcome.

According to weblog search engine Technorati, more than 75 million weblogs existed on the Internet as of April 15, 2007 (About Technorati, n.d.). Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal identified "the power of the blogger" as one of its Top 10 stories in 2006, calling it "the biggest story in media and marketing, not just in sports" (Stories of the Year, 2006, p. 11). However, most sport organizations have yet to embrace the blog as a form of organizational communication (Ballard, 2006; Brown, 2003; Mickle, 2006). Those sport organizations which do use their website effectively have the ability to strengthen relationships with customers who are already highly identified and loyal to the organization.

Kelleher and Martin (2006) found the conversational human voice construct of organizational weblogs to be positively correlated with four relationship outcomes: trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment. Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) concluded organizational weblogs are more effective than traditional organizational websites at establishing and maintaining organization-public relationships.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the readers of a Major League Baseball team's organizational weblog from the standpoint of team identification, team consumption, and demographic information. Data gathered in August 2007 from weblog readers was used to develop a profile of persons who read a MLB organizational weblog. Trail, Robinson, Dick, and Gillentine's (2003) Point of Attachment Index was used to measure team, sport, and player identification.

Results from the study showed weblog readers were voracious media consumers of the team's games (83.7% watch 41 or more of the team's games per year), repeat ticket customers (45.9% attend greater than 10 of the team's games per year), and highly identified, both with the sport ($M = 6.11$, $SD = .64$) and the team ($M = 6.42$, $SD = .77$), however, not with players ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.15$).

The results of the study confirm readers of an MLB organizational weblog are highly identified customers of the organization. As Milne and McDonald (1999, p. 143) noted, an organization's website is a powerful tool to dialogue with customers, suggesting "Marketers who want to be successful in the future must constantly be listening to their customers, gathering information on the types of products they want and services they desire." This study suggests sport organizations would be wise to consider implementing organizational weblogs as an effective public relations and marketing vehicle for their organization.