Crafting a Social Networking Plan Your Audience will Adore: A Focus on the Montreal Canadiens' Largely Untapped Fan Base

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Social media are quickly becoming the quickest way for sport organisations to effectively reach a large audience base with public relations and marketing messages (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). The NHL is arguably the major sports league that has best capitalised on the interactivity of these new tools, though social media implementation has not been universal or standardised across individual markets. According to an often-quoted Simmons Market Research survey, the NHL has the most educated, tech-savvy and youngest fans of all professional sports, and while the league failed to jump on the broadcast TV bandwagon in the 1930s (Bellamy & Shultz, 2006), it has certainly recognised the marketing potential of new and social media.

In this presentation, I look at the social networking concepts that have allowed the NHL to capitalise on its hungry fan base by enhancing the fan's professional ice hockey experience and reinforcing their attachment to the game, its teams and its athletes. Specifically, I will give a detailed analysis of the social networking initiatives that have worked across the league and explain how and why they should be implemented by the Montreal Canadiens’ organisation, which has yet to fully exploit its large fan base. While most sport organisations have jumped at the opportunity the Internet has given them to control their marketing and communications message without having to go through the intermediary that is traditional media (Boyle & Haynes, 2002), the Canadiens have taken a more tentative approach, effectively opening the door for media partners like the Montreal Gazette to create their own spaces in which the Habs fan market can interact; in this case, the HabsInside/Out.com blog and forum.

Largely known as the most demanding patrons in professional hockey, Habs fans have so far been dissatisfied with team-led initiatives on Facebook and Twitter. They have therefore taken advantage of the control that new media provides them (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006) by creating their own communities and information streams to fill the perceived gap. By focusing on the audience's wants and needs, integrating its pre-existing online communities, and interacting with them to become a part of the fan community, I argue that it is not too late for the Montreal Canadiens, as well as other sport organisations, to truly capitalise on its hungry dormant market by creating strong, permanent links with their audience in order to increase brand loyalty (and all that entails).

The audience and the media, whether traditional, new or social, play a crucial role in the new sport communication process, which features key facets like interconnectivity, interactivity, and accessibility (Pederson, Miloch, Laucella, 2007). According to a presentation by the NHL’s Senior Vice-President of Digital Media, Perry Cooper, at the Forrester Consumer Forum on October 28, 2010, the initial strategy behind the NHL’s development of digital media was to reduce the gap between “us” (the league) and “them” (the fans). Interactivity, a happy consequence, has become more important to some fans, especially the estimated 51% of the NHL’s displaced fans, than having direct access to their team’s unidirectional media releases, and it is this aspect of new media that I will focus on as it is sorely missing from the Montreal Canadiens’ current social networking strategy. Once sport organisations have mastered the art of interactivity – and usability – they will likely be prepared to integrate any future media technologies into their online branding strategies.