What Did They Say? A Content Analysis of Professional Team Tweets

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Twitter's rapid growth has significantly impacted sport communication. From ESPN citing team and player tweets during broadcasts to Nike including Twitter hashtags in their commercials we have seen Twitter significantly impact the sport industry on a variety of fronts. Melissa Rosenthal Brenner, NBA Vice President of Marketing was also quoted saying “social media has changed the way we communicate, even on a very basic level” (Burnz Ortiz, 2011, p. 7). The growth of Twitter usage amongst athletes, sport organizations, and sport journalists has garnered attention from sport management academicians. In a survey of 146 sport journalists, Schultz and Sheffer (2010a) found that sport journalists were most likely to use Twitter to break news, promote other work, and provide their personal opinion. With younger journalists and those involved in broadcasts more supportive of adopting Twitter than their older and/or print media counterparts. Interestingly, a content analysis of sport journalists’ tweets revealed they used Twitter primarily for opinion and commentary and much less for breaking news and promotion of other work (Sheffer & Shultz, 2010b).

Twitter usage has also been analyzed from the athlete’s perspective. A case study of athletes use of Twitter during the Tour of Italy (cycling event) revealed several categories of tweets commonly used by athletes including sharing commentary and opinions, fostering interactivity, and cultivating insider perspectives (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). In a broader study of athlete Twitter usage Pegoraro (2010) found athletes in the NFL to be the most active tweeters, followed by golf, soccer, NBA, tennis, NHL, MMA, motorsports, MLB, and finally winter sports. Pegoraro (2010) also reported that overall athletes’ tweets were primarily focused on interacting with fans, followed by insight into the athlete’s personal life, then discussions of business life, discussions about other sports or athletes, pop culture references, discussion of the athlete’s sport, and finally chatting with other athletes. In a very similar study, Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2011) found that athletes mostly used Twitter to interact with fans. Athletes were also found to tweet about random, non-sport related topics, share information about themselves or their team, provide content such as pictures or web links, promote events or sponsors, and discuss other athletes.

As noted above, researchers have identified a need to better understand the use of Twitter within the sport landscape. However, to date, the focus of this research has highlighted the use of Twitter by journalists or athletes. Nearly all sport teams have acquired and promote a Twitter account yet little is know exactly how these teams are using this medium. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine professional sport team tweets and better understand their use of this communication vehicle.

To address the purpose of this study a content analysis was conducted on 783 tweets from teams within the NFL, NHL, NBA, and MLB. During this time frame both the NBA and NHL were in-season, while the NFL and MLB were out of season. Team Twitter accounts were obtained through the website sportsin140.com which provides a comprehensive list of verified athlete, team, and league Twitter accounts. Within each league every third team was selected for inclusion in the current study. Over a one week time frame in February of 2010 each of the selected teams’ Twitter feed was visited and the 20 most recent tweets were analyzed.

Each of the tweets were categorized into one of 14 categories. These categories were derived from those used by Hambrick et al. (2010). A pilot study revealed the need to expand two categories to better suite the nature of tweets put forth by teams compared to athletes. The 14 categories included interactivity, diversion, information sharing (expanded into four, more detailed, categories including in-game information, game extension information, team information, and player information), content, fanship, promotion (expanded to six categories to include the promotion of sponsors, promotion of events, promotion of team affiliated corporate social responsibility, promotion of tickets, promotion of team related goods and services, and promotion of individuals).

Initial inter-reliability was 82%, however after discussion 100% agreement was acquired. Of the 783 tweets analyzed from teams within the NFL (n=220), NHL (n=198), NBA (n=204), and MLB (n=160) the category with the
The most amount of tweets was content (292), followed by in-game information (169), interactivity (112), player information (88), team information (55), promotion of events (23), promotion of tickets (11), promotion of team related goods and services (11), diversion (5), promotion of others (5), promotion of sponsors (4), promotion of team related corporate social responsibility (4), fanship (3), and game extension information (1). Within each sport the most common categories included interactivity, in-game information, team information, and content.

The current study begins to fill the gap in the literature with respect to new forms of communication. Twitter has been viewed as a medium for two-way communication. The current study, like Pegararo (2010) and Hambrick (2010), strongly demonstrate that athletes and now teams are engaging in interactive communication via Twitter. This is substantially different than traditional forms of communication where teams would speak AT fans rather than TO fans. Interactivity allows teams to engage fans, and gather feedback in a timely, if not immediate, fashion. This interactivity provides teams the ability to know their fans, as most followers are likely fans, on a deeper level opening the opportunity for individual marketing campaigns.

The current study has also revealed that teams are striving to direct their followers to other sources of media such as videos, picture, or websites via Twitter. Perhaps these tweets are an attempt to provide fans greater insight into their team through more in-depth information found on their website or elsewhere requiring more than 140 characters. This category may also include the lighter side of the team with pictures of employees or players goofing off, humanizing the team to the fan. This category certainly needs further investigation as it has the potential to contain a variety of content.

Teams were also found to provide fans with an abundance of information through Twitter. Most commonly, teams were using Twitter as a means to provide fans with live scoring and stats during a game. While some fans may appreciate this service, this use of Twitter may become problematic, as some fans may feel bombarded with such frequent tweeting and choose to stop following. Teams just need to be cognizant of the potential repercussions of their tweeting actions. Finally, one of the most interesting findings was that only 6.7% of the tweets were of promotional nature. This included the promotion of upcoming events, tickets, or sponsors. Considering all teams within the sample were professional organizations required to generate revenue to remain solvent one would think this category would have found stronger support. Overall, the current study shed new light on an area with a paucity of empirical research. Teams appear to be utilizing Twitter to primarily interact with their followers and provide information and content. This area certainly requires more empirical investigation to better understand Twitter within the sport world as well as unveil areas where sport organizations and athletes may be able to better capitalize on this dynamic platform.