

A Qualitative Examination of Branding Strategies Employed by Sport Organizations through Social Media

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Friday, May 31, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

Abstract 2013-164

3:10 PM

(Room 406)

Social media is an important marketing and branding tool and has changed, and enhanced, the way the consumer and the organization interact (Weinberg, 2009). As such, sport marketers have begun to employ social media strategies in an effort to interact with consumers. Sport organizations often have some sort of social media presence, on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and are engaging in social media activities that may be designed to have a positive impact on their brand. Although it is becoming a more frequently used marketing tool, social media and branding have yet to be linked in the literature. In particular, what is not understood is if sport organizations are making a cognizant effort to impact their brand through social media use, and if they feel that social media can be used as a platform to brand their organization. This study sought to take a qualitative examination of sport organizations' usage of social media platforms and their branding message.

Literature Review

Previous research on social media in sport has primarily focused on understanding the users of sites such as Facebook and Twitter and how sport organizations are presenting information through the media forums (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2010). However, as mentioned, what has yet to be studied are the potential ways sport organizations are using social media in order to have a positive impact on their brand. This is important to understand as building positive brand equity may allow sport organizations to generate greater awareness for their brand, impact their overall image, create loyalty, and increase the potential to generate revenue from fans and corporate sponsors (Ross, 2006; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006).

This potential increased interaction with the brand through social media may also aid in developing relationships with consumers and fans of these organizations. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and social media are beginning to be integrated as organizations are trying to combine online forums, customer feedback tools, blogs, wikis, and community platforms into their already existing CRM (Ang, 2011). These platforms make up the new term social CRM which has been described as a way to help engage the organization at any time, provide the consumer with an experience that is personal to each individual, interact with one another in a way that is mutually valuable, and to tailor what the organization does around what they know about the consumer (Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011). Should positive relationships be developed it could impact the brand of the organization and create a new avenue to position the brand through the increased personalized interactions.

Methodology

The methodology employed to determine how sport organizations may be branding their teams through social media was qualitative in nature using in-depth interviews of eight sport organizations. The sport organizations varied, consisting of national governing bodies (n = 2), professional sport teams (n = 2), and collegiate athletic departments (n = 4). As Eisenhardt (1989) recommends using between four and ten cases in order to allow an in-depth analysis of each case, and increase the validity in the results, this sample was deemed appropriate. In-depth interviews were then conducted with individuals at these organizations who were in-charge of their social media efforts. Data was collected during one-on-one interviews, using an open-ended, semi-structured format. The interviews included a total of ten questions which were designed to understand the organizations' brand strategy and positioning, if they are using social media to portray their brand image, and if they feel social media is a good tool to use to promote

their brand.

In order to analyze the interview responses two different coding steps will be conducted. First cycle coding, also known as structural coding will be the first coding step and results in identifying overarching fragments of text from the interview responses (Saldana, 2009). This first step will lead to the development of in-depth categories across a variety of topics and has been deemed as an appropriate method to use for qualitative analysis and the coding of interview transcripts (Saldana, 2009). The structural coding will allow for original categories to emerge for further analysis. Following the structural coding, second cycle coding will provide a deeper, more analytical view of the interview responses. This round of coding is known as focused coding. Focused coding identifies the most frequent or most significant initial codes to develop categories that are descriptive of the salient themes that emerge from the categories (Saldana, 2009).

Initial Findings/Discussion

While the analysis and coding of the interviews are still in progress, a preliminary examination suggests that sport organizations are consciously using social media as a branding tool. Specifically, the organizations are attempting to enforce their already existing brand image through social media in a way which is consistent with their other brand marketing efforts. One common theme that emerged is that the organizations do feel that the majority of their social media followers are already highly identified with the organization, and as such have existing positive attitudes and associations with the brand. Therefore, a challenge they face is trying to promote the brand through social media to new consumers or those that may not be as highly identified. The preliminary findings also suggest that these organizations are attempting to use social media to develop strong relationships with their consumers through one-on-one interactions with the brand. We anticipate upon further analysis of the interviews that more themes will emerge which provide a more in-depth examination of social media as a viable branding outlet for sport organizations. The full findings of this study will provide numerous potential practical and theoretical implications and point to the need for future research on brand effects through social media.