A Qualitative Examination of Social Media Use by the Four Grand Slam Tennis Events

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Introduction

Social media is becoming increasingly important to sports organizations, events, and marketing professionals in regards to how people experience sports and sporting events. As a result sport marketers have taken a growing interest in social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and have developed various social strategies in order to connect with consumers. While it is becoming a prominent marketing tool in practice, current academic literature has not yet determined the most appropriate use of social media as part of an organizations branding and relationship marketing efforts. While research in this area is still in the nascent stage, studies are now beginning to explore the use of social media by sports organizations in this context (Abeza, Reilly & Ried, 2013; Blaszka, Walsh, Cianfrome & Lim, 2013). While scholarship to date has considered usage by athletes, teams, leagues and organizations, the area of sporting events remains largely under researched. The use of social media is having a profound effect on tennis, a sport that is steeped in tradition and is often considered ‘behind the times’ (Lawless, 2010), but limited research exists in this context. This study employed a qualitative approach to investigating the use of social media as a site for branding and relationship marketing during the four Grand Slam tennis tournaments in 2013.

Literature Review

Previous research conducted on social media use within a sporting context has primarily focused on either the fan perspective (McCarthy, Pioch, Rowley & Ashworth, 2011), or how Facebook and Twitter offer sports brands (e.g., athletes, teams, and organizations) a new medium to enhance their relationships with fans (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Ioakmidis, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Additionally, the limited research that has been conducted exists within an American context, centering on American athletes and sports leagues, such as Tiger Woods, the National Basketball Association, and the National Football League (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Wallace, Wilson & Miloch, 2011; Waters, Burke, Jackson & Buning, 2011). Granted, studies with a European focus are emerging, but are mainly situated within the football context (Maenhout, 2011; McCarthy, 2011). To date, there has been no significant research on the use of social media as a site for branding and relationship marketing by sports events.

While the literature suggests that social media provides marketers with a strategic medium to foster stronger relationships with fans, this is not the only benefit. Social media sites also offer sports organizations and brands the unique opportunity to engage in a dialogue with consumers and potential consumers in an effort to build and maintain brand image, association and awareness through their communication with fans (Wallace, Yang, Miloch, 2010). These new ways of communicating with fans are significant as they provide professional sporting bodies with the opportunity to establish and nurture a personal relationship with consumers, facilitated by increased brand interaction, ultimately leading to increased brand awareness.

Research has shown that engaging with customers creates a satisfying experience, establishes trust between the organization and the consumer, fosters consumer involvement with the brand, and promotes commitment and loyalty to the brand (Bowden, 2009; Wallace et al., 2010). As a result, social media provides sports organizations with a platform to manage and build their brand, through opportunities to engage with fans, and a forum for fans with similar interests to interact with each other.

Methodology
This study was qualitative in nature and involved in-depth interviews with key social media producers for each of the Grand Slam tennis tournaments in 2013. Across the events, a total of five individuals were interviewed and included: the Social Media Coordinator and the Social Media Advisor from the Australian Open, the Web Editor from Roland Garros, the Editorial Content Manager from Wimbledon, and the Director of Content Strategy from the US Open. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each individual and consisted of 20 open-ended questions designed to understand each organization’s strategy for using various social media platforms, their opinion on the value of social media usage in promoting their event’s brand and developing relationships with fans, and the challenges they face in using these platforms to achieve branding and relationship marketing goals. Interviews lasted from 82 to 95 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed, interviewees were sent a copy of the interview transcript for verification.

Initial Findings/Discussion

While the analysis is still in progress, initial findings indicate that each Grand Slam tennis event intentionally uses social media as part of their marketing strategy to build brand awareness and foster longer lasting relationships with fans. All interviewees indicated that they are cognizant of the need to ensure that their event’s brand image portrayed through social media is consistent with other marketing collateral and strongly reflects their established identity. Interviewees also noted that each social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) provides a unique and different purpose. This needs to be acknowledged by individuals tasked with the role of developing a social media presence, whether it is for an event, an athlete or a sports league, in order to maximize the benefits from each platform. Preliminary findings also suggest that these events are using social media to develop their own personality and humanize their brand. Additionally, the interviewees found that fans respond more favorably to the conversational approach and, in doing so, fans were more likely to engage with the brand as a result, leading to more individualized interactions which aided in developing stronger relationships with these fans. It is anticipated that further analysis will enable a better understanding of the utilization of social media as a branding and relationship marketing tool. The full findings of this study will be presented, along with the potential theoretical and practical implications.