America’s New Pastime: How Baseball Teams are Integrating Instagram into their Social Media Efforts

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For decades there have been 25 men on a baseball roster, 53 on a football roster, and 15 participants on a basketball team, but in recent years all have added one additional player: social media. Social media has truly become a key player in the sports world, with teams of all genres employing one or more social media platforms into their marketing strategies. While Facebook and Twitter have become standard tools, emerging platforms such as the photo-sharing network Instagram are trying to make the cut to become the tool of choice for fans across the globe. Although quite popular among sports fans, little research has been conducted examining the Instagram network in a sports setting. The purpose of this study is to examine how Major League Baseball (MLB) teams employ the social media platform Instagram into their marketing and branding strategy. As one of the early adopters of the platform, the MLB serves as a unique example worthy of study. Findings of the study may be of importance to practitioners of various fields, including sport management, media relations, and academia. The study is grounded in parasocial interaction theory.

Literature Review

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of social media in the world of sports marketing. With 83% of fans checking social media while simultaneously watching a sporting event on television (KT Tape, 2012), teams and organizations are able to communicate with fans on multiple screens. The most recent research on social media and sports has primarily focused on Twitter and how it is being used throughout sports. Twitter’s emergence has been showcased by the sheer amount of athletes, teams, and leagues that are employing this form of social media (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Twitter has proven to be an excellent way for marketers to open a new line of communication with fans.

Fans and sports marketers are always looking for the “latest and greatest” in the social media world, and it is Instagram that is quickly grabbing that title. Much like other social networks, Instagram allows users to follow others and share content. Unlike the mostly text-based Twitter, however, Instagram initially allowed only photos to be shared among followers. In June 2013, the program expanded to video as well, allowing users to share 15-second clips. Adoption among sports marketers has been slow, but popularity is quickly growing among fans. Among the most popular social networks, Instagram is the fastest growing social media site among fans posting content after games – up 115% in 2013 when compared to a year earlier (Broughton, 2013). Major League Baseball (MLB) is one of the first professional leagues to attempt to fully embrace the photo and video sharing site, as the league was the first to have every single one of their clubs on Instagram (Major League Baseball on Instagram!, 2012). The fans’ response was overwhelmingly positive. A month into the 2012 season, there was a 400% increase in Instagram photos posted at MLB games compared to the entire 2011 season (Laird, 2012). With MLB leading the way in demonstrating how sports marketers can use Instagram to achieve new line of communication with their fans, it is logical to examine what these baseball teams are posting to their individual accounts.

Methodology

In order to determine how teams are using Instagram, a content analysis was conducted. For the purposes of this study, the Instagram accounts for all 30 Major League Baseball (MLB) teams were selected as the sample due to the sport’s early adoption of the social network. The sample consisted of all the posts from the 30 teams during August 2013. This month was chosen specifically because it falls within baseball season, so fans will likely be most interested at this time. In addition, August was selected because it is after Instagram introduced video options to their network. This allowed for an equal opportunity of video posts and still photo posts. The sample consisted of 1,796 posts (mean = 59.87, SD = 35.022), with a total of 1,693 photos and 103 videos.
In order to properly categorize the photos and videos, a coding guide was created based on a preliminary analysis of the posts. Initially, the mutually exclusive categories included (1) game action, (2) “behind the scenes,” (3) promotional material, (4) fans, (5) contests, (6) team news, (7) historical photos/videos, and (8) other. After the initial coding sessions aimed at achieving intercoder reliability, additional categories may be added to the sample if the frequency warrants a separate category. These possibilities include “other events at the stadium” and “community involvement.” A sample of 360 posts (20% of the sample) will be used to achieve intercoder reliability in order to provide validation of the coding scheme. After all the posts have been coded, the results will be combined into a single data sheet where the information will be imported into SPSS for further analysis. Frequency tables will be created to determine the numbers of posts within each category.

Discussion

While the coding of the Instagram posts from each team is still in progress, a preliminary examination suggests that the baseball teams are using the social network to give fans a glimpse of the team that would not normally be available to them. Many of the posts fall into the “behind the scenes” category, with teams uploading pictures from the locker room, at a player's home, or in stadium locations not accessible to the fan. Specifically, this gives fans a reason to follow the team’s Instagram account because it is giving them access to something that they cannot get from any other source. While the traditional media can provide photos from the game or a community appearance, the team’s media can go where other photographers cannot. This may explain why a minority of the Instagram photos from these MLB accounts are of pictures from the game, as the teams are instead looking to spotlight other aspects of the game experience. Many of the photos and videos posted are of the fans in the seats. In addition, early analysis shows that despite the integration of video into Instagram’s functions, many of the teams are not embracing this option. In the sampled month of August, 10 of the 30 teams did not post a single video. With more than 50% of sports fans responding that they use YouTube for sports-related activity (Broughton, 2013), the video aspect of Instagram appears to be a feature that should not be ignored by teams.

With further analysis, more themes regarding the teams’ use of Instagram may emerge, which will provide further explanation of how the social network can be used to interact with fans. Ultimately, the full findings of this study will provide practical and theoretical implications for sports marketers looking for ways to interact with fans through this photo and video sharing social network.