Social Media Slam! An Examination of World Wrestling Entertainment’s Social Media Strategies

Kevin Hull, University of Florida

While sports marketers attempt to integrate social media into their websites, television shows, and other forms of traditional media, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has become a model for how to create an online social media community. The professional wrestling organization has been labeled “a social media monolith,” (Schamberger, 2013), “the champions of social media,” (LePage, 2013) and the “sports and entertainment world’s most digitally progressive brand” (Laird, 2013). Wrestling may not have the same prominence in the sports world as Major League Baseball (MLB) or the National Football League (NFL), but there is nothing minor league about their foray into social media. In fact, the organization’s Facebook page has more followers than MLB and the NFL combined. What should be of most interest to sports marketers from both college and professional sports organizations is how WWE has integrated their social media efforts into their traditional media entities. The purpose of this study is to examine the methods in which WWE integrates social media into their weekly flagship television show Monday Night Raw and how these techniques can be used by other sports leagues and teams.

Literature Review

Previous research has demonstrated that social media is changing the world of sports (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson, & Kassing, 2011). Not only are teams, leagues, and athletes using social media, but the fans are flocking to Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks as well. In addition, fans are increasingly logging onto social media during sporting events, as 83% of fans say they use social media while simultaneously watching a sporting event on television (KT Tape, 2012). However, little research has been conducted on what is bringing these fans to social media during the games and what is motivating them to get involved in social media conversations once online. This is important to understand because teams are constantly striving to locate new ways to engage their fan base and create another avenue for team involvement.

Social media has allowed for sports marketers to create an online community among their followers. Users not only get information about their favorite team or player, but they also have the opportunity to interact with others as well. Identification with a team or sport creates a sense of community among fans, and social media can increase that feeling. For example, a fan of WWE is part of a larger community of fellow wrestling fans, and with hundreds of millions of active users on social media (Bennett, 2012), there is an even larger community of fans that can now interact with each other. This sense of community is composed of four elements: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Social networks are able to reach all four elements. While community was originally defined as a relationship that must be local (Wellman & Leighton, 1979), the Internet has removed that restriction, and has enabled virtual communities worldwide.

Methodology

In order to determine how WWE is integrating social media into their traditional media outlets, a content analysis was conducted. Ten episodes of the WWE’s flagship television show Monday Night Raw were analyzed for the study. The sample included all ten weekly episodes between February 18, 2013, and April 22, 2013. This time period was chosen because it surrounded WWE’s most prominent event of the year, Wrestlemania. It can be hypothesized that WWE would want their social media mentions to be at their greatest during their most visible and popular event of the year. Each episode is approximately three hours and fifteen minutes, including commercials. For the purposes of this study, only the content created by WWE was examined, excluding commercials.

Each episode was analyzed by a team of two coders, with a coding guide acting as the basis for how each social media mention was recorded. The social media related content was categorized in two ways: (1) the type of integration into the show and (2) the language used by the announcers or displayed on graphics. This allows for a two-pronged approach at understanding how WWE is drawing attention to their social media efforts. By analyzing the type of integration, the different methods can be recorded, along with the frequency of each use. The language used can be analyzed to determine what phrases encourage fans to become part of the show and to use social media.
while watching television. By using two different approaches in coding, a more complete picture of WWE’s efforts can be portrayed.

Discussion

While the data analysis is ongoing, a preliminary examination suggests that WWE is using multiple methods to get fans involved with their social media efforts and make the fan feel like part of the action. Social media use was encouraged through Twitter hashtags, voting in polls, and encouraging fans to send posts directly to the announcers. Ultimately, it is the community building that WWE emphasizes in their social media push. Fan tweets are scrolled on the bottom of screen, allowing for those chosen fans to have their opinions shown to a television audience of millions. The announcers reveal the “trending topics” on Twitter, so fans can use similar hashtags to have conversations with other fans from across the world. To further create that sense of community, announcers frequently tell viewers to “follow along with us” and “we’ve been asking who you think is going to win.” This gives the impression that the viewer is not just watching, but is actually part of the action. The completed findings of this study will be of interest to both academics and professionals who are looking for a further explanation of how WWE has successfully created a sense of community among their fans through their social media efforts.