Branding Opportunities in Twitter: Evidence from the Professional Soccer Industry

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The prominence and attractiveness of sports brands and the strong emotional attachment between sports clubs and fans (Richelieu, 2004; Vallerand et al., 2008) have made the sports industry an ideal business context in which to use social media in order to reach and engage with fans and establish and foster an interactive and long-term relationship (Ballouli, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Wallace et al., 2011; Williams and Chinn, 2010). Indeed, sports organizations at all levels, from high school and amateur sports organizations to top professional clubs, have realized the brand-building benefits of social media and try to maintain an online presence in several social media outlets (Coyle, 2010; Ioakimidis, 2010). Soccer brands in particular are amongst the most followed brands worldwide (Socialbakers, 2014) while soccer is the most prominent conversation topic in social media (Stoll, 2014).

Given the proliferation of social media as well as the importance of fans for a team’s growth and competitive advantage (Bauer et al., 2008), sports organizations have an excellent opportunity to reach their audience, encourage interactions with the sports product, and build positive associations towards their brand. According to Keller (1993), brand associations contain the meaning of the brand for consumers and can be divided into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Brand attributes, which are the focus of the present study, constitute those features that (the consumer thinks) characterize a product or service. Attributes can be classified into product-related and non-product-related. Product-related attributes are those attributes necessary for performing the primary product or service function sought by consumers (Keller, 1993). Non-product-related attributes are defined as external aspects of the product or service that relate to its purchase or consumption, but do not relate directly to the product performance or service function (Keller, 1993).

Keller’s (1993) assertions have been successfully adapted by several researchers, both in the North American (Gladden and Funk, 2002) as well as in the European sports context (Bauer et al., 2008) in order to measure brand associations in team sports. However, little previous research has examined branding attributes vis-à-vis social media. Research to date has mainly focused on the use of Facebook and Twitter as communication tools by athletes and sports organizations (Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Pegraro, 2010; Pronschinske et al., 2012) or on sports fans’ motivations, perceptions and preferences regarding the use of such tools (Clavio and Kian, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Gibbs et al., 2014; Park et al., 2009). Wallace et al. (2011) examined the use of Facebook as a brand management tool in American college athletics while, in the European professional sports context, McCarthy et al. (2014) examined the issues faced by sport marketers regarding the development of a social media strategy of their soccer clubs.

Against this background, the purpose of the present study was twofold:

a) To analyze the content published in Twitter by a European professional soccer organization based on Keller’s (1993) conceptualization of brand attributes and its adoption by sports branding models (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer et al., 2008); and

b) To examine how brand attributes influences the responses of the organizations’ online followers in terms of key engagement features of Twitter such as Reply, Retweet, and Favorite.

The present study adopted an exploratory approach, based on a single case study design. In particular, this study collected and analyzed content from the official Twitter page of the English Premier League (EPL) club Liverpool FC (LFC). With a view to examining whether different patterns of content distribution apply during the season, LFC’s Twitter page was perused for two distinct time periods, on- and off-season. In total, 631 tweets (off-season: 299, on-season: 332) were collected and subsequently analyzed. Based on the aforementioned sport branding models...
The content of each tweet was categorized by the two first authors into product and non-product related attributes. In addition, the data collection process involved the quantitative collection of the responses (frequency of occurrence) of LFC’s Twitter followers to the clubs’ tweets in terms of key engagement features (i.e. Reply, Retweet, and Favorite). Chi-square tests examined the amount of coverage posted by time of season and brand attributes while Mann-Whitney-U tests evaluated fan interaction with product-related or non-product-related attributes.

The results extend the current knowledge base of social media brand management in the sports industry and showed that tools such as Twitter are capable of communicating a variety of product-related and non-product-related brand attributes. At the same time, such tools are capable of giving fans a more active role, increasing their engagement and foster the links between them and their club. Identifying which content increases engagement and trying to offer the optimum balance of product and non-product related attributes affects the creation of revenues in both in the short and in the long run. More detailed results along with theoretical and managerial implications will be presented.

Selected references

