Major League Baseball Teams’ Promotional Tactics to Get Fan Engagement on Instagram

Joon Kyoung Kim, University of South Carolina
Kevin Hull (Advisor), University of South Carolina
Annelie Schmittel, University of Florida

Sports teams of all genres utilize social media platforms in their marketing strategies. While they are aiming to win games, they are also looking to be winners on their financial balance sheet. The purpose of this study is to examine how Major League Baseball teams are using Instagram and if they are using covert or overt promotional techniques to encourage profit maximization. Since Instagram is a free service, those businesses that believe in the tenets of the theory of the firm could find it an ideal place to increase their bottom line.

This research is an update of a study first presented at the NASSM 2014 conference. At the time, Instagram was still in its infancy, and Major League Baseball teams were attempting to figure out how best to engage their fans. Now, two years later, Instagram has 400 million active users, and will generate $600 million in advertising revenue in 2015 (Kharpal, 2015). As the social network itself brings in income, it is worth collecting updated data to see how sports organizations are attempting to turn Instagram into a moneymaking venture themselves.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies that have demonstrated the importance of social media in the world of sports marketing. However, it is Instagram that stands out as one of the fastest growing social networks, especially among young adults. More than half of internet-using adults ages 18-29 have an Instagram account (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Among sports fans, Instagram has become the go-to place after games, with the amount of fans posting post-game content to the site up 115% in 2013 when compared to a year earlier (Broughton, 2013). Baseball fans seem to have gravitated to the site in droves, as 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).

While the goal of any professional sports team (with some outlying exceptions) is to win games, teams are ultimately a business. As stated within the theory of the firm, the goal of any business is profit maximization (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 2004). Teams can increase profits through several methods, including ticket and merchandise sales, but how they achieve those sales can vary. Organizations can use overt or covert promotions in order to increase fan willingness to spend money on their team. Overt promotions would explicitly encourage ticket or merchandise sales, while covert promotions would simply be attempting to get fans excited about the product without an obvious promotion (Coffey & Cleary, 2011).

Method

In order to examine the Instagram practices of each team, the most recent 50 photos were gathered from each of the 30 franchises on August 30, 2015 (N = 1,500). Photos were coded into one of twelve categories for photo content and sixteen different hashtag possibilities were also coded. Number of comments and numbers of likes were also coded for each photo. Two coders coded 150 posts (10% of the sample) to determine intercoder reliability. Testing with Krippendorff’s α determined a high level of reliability for hashtag used (α = .842), category of photo (α = .834), number of likes (α = .973), and number of comments (α = .987). Based on the acceptable level of initial agreement for intercoder reliability, the remaining posts were divided among the two coders.

Results and Discussion

A content analysis revealed that Major League Baseball teams are infrequently using Instagram for overt promotional purposes. Less than 6% of photos were coded as overt promotions (86 photos, 5.7%). For example, the Atlanta Braves used a photo of one of their players in a superhero cape to promote an upcoming “Superhero Day.” Additionally, only 24 of the photos (1.6%) contained a hashtag that was overtly promotional. The Cleveland Indians
were one of the few who did, as they used “#RideWithTito” to promote a future game in which the team gave away a bobblehead depicting manager Terry “Tito” Francona on a scooter.

However, further analysis revealed that this might be due to a lack of fan interest in these types of posts. Of the twelve different photo types, only two categories (team’s charity efforts and not baseball related) had a lower number of average likes than those coded as “promotional.” Additionally, photos that used an overtly promotional hashtag had an average of over 4,000 less likes per photo than those that did not have an overtly promotional hashtag.

Teams instead focused on giving behind-the-scenes photos (28.9% of photos, the most of any category), team news (19.1% of photos), and simply using their team name as the hashtag (52.7% of photos contained a team name hashtag). By giving photos that contained final scores or the day’s lineup, and repeatedly using their own team name, MLB teams used covert tactics to get fans excited about their product. It appears to be working, as team news and behind-the-scenes photos have the most comments of all baseball-specific photos. Therefore, MLB teams are demonstrating that covert promotional techniques are more effective in getting fan engagement than overt promotional techniques on Instagram. Further analysis of the success of fan engagement on Instagram will be discussed in relation to the number of likes and comments received based on hashtags and photo content.

While data from this study are specific to Major League Baseball, the results can be applied to any sport. Sports marketing practitioners from both college and professional sports teams can have a better understanding of the types of photos and hashtags that generate the most engagement with followers, which may, in turn, lead to more purchases from consumers. Additionally, the results add to the discussion regarding theory of the firm and promotional tactics used by businesses in an effort to maximize profits. Instead of explicitly requesting fans to make purchases, Major League Baseball teams attempt to get fans excited about the team, hoping that will result in future sales. For fan engagement, results demonstrate that covert promotional techniques are more effective than overt promotional tactics.