Exploring the Role of Digital Marketing in Facilitating Value Co-Creation in Small Sports Clubs

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Academic research within the field of sport management has often noted that sports clubs must adopt a business-like approach in order to best fulfil organisational objectives and operate successfully within increasingly competitive markets (Thibault et al., 1993; Skirstad and Chelladurai, 2011). A large focus of sport marketing literature has been on the elite level of sport (Gallagher et al., 2012; Bednall et al., 2012). There has also been significant research conducted at an amateur level of sport on the managerial issues faced by such organisations related to volunteering and a lack of resources (Nichols and James, 2008; Sakires et al., 2009; Thiel and Mayer, 2009).

However, there has been little research conducted at the middle-level between amateur and elite, where the organisations aspire to compete at a higher level, yet suffer from the same limitations as most amateur sports clubs (Gallagher et al., 2009). At this level of sport, there is no known research on how digital marketing communications can act as an interface where value is co-created between the club and its fans. Without academic research providing grounding for a strategic approach to marketing practices in sports clubs, valuable resources may be misused or wasted (Thibault et al., 1993).

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify how clubs currently utilise their digital-based marketing communications channels when interacting with fans; to understand from the fans’ perspective what value is gained from this, and what content is desired or absent; and ultimately to evaluate whether or not current practices are effective in facilitating value co-creation.

Marketing Communications and the Small Sports Club

The small sports club is defined in this research as a club which is a member of a national league, has an average attendance well below available capacity, operates as a not-for-profit organisation and is administered predominantly by volunteers, but aspires to compete at a higher level (Gallagher et al., 2009; Gilmore et al., 2011; Gallagher et al., 2012). By this definition, small sports clubs can be comparable with small-to-medium sized enterprises within the context of sports, whereby they operate with a lack of resources such as time, capital and expertise.

Digital marketing communications channels have become increasingly popular within sports organisations as the widespread accessibility of the internet has grown within society (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). These channels consist of club websites, social media accounts and mobile apps that have been adopted by sports clubs with the intention of communicating, engaging and developing relationships with fans (Eagleman, 2013). Due to the inherent interactivity of these channels, it is important that clubs understand what content creates value for their fans in developing these relationships (Uhrich, 2014).

Service Dominant Logic in Sport

Academic literature has suggested that marketing now operates with an underlying service-dominant logic, whereby value is determined through the use of a product rather than in economic value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo et al., 2008). In the context of sport, fans become actors that co-create value with clubs (Woratschek, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand how this process is facilitated by digital marketing communication channels where interactions can be occur, as an understanding of this may lead to competitive advantage for the sports clubs (Uhrich, 2014). A lack of understanding could also lead to potential value co-destruction, whereby the misuse of resources can destroy or diminish value for certain consumer groups (Stieler et al., 2014).

Method
Initial exploratory research was conducted with a panel of experts on September 8th 2015 in Belfast regarding the gap between academic literature and practical application of sports marketing within the context of Northern Ireland. It was apparent that a greater understanding of how value is co-created via social media is necessary from both practitioners and academics. The MD of the Northern Ireland Football League recognised, “we need to get better in the digital and social media side for our younger audiences”. This was endorsed by Prof. Ann Pegoraro, who suggested, “social media is where your fans are – it’s where your new fans are going to be.”

This research employs a qualitative approach due to the objectives requiring the identification and interpretation of consumer values, and understanding how clubs use digital marketing channels. The locus of the research is within Northern Ireland, and focuses on all 40 soccer clubs that are members of the Northern Ireland Football League. This sample of clubs was chosen as they fit the definition of a small sports club (Gallagher et al., 2012) and are accessible.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted with marketing managers at the soccer clubs. The focus is to identify how these channels are currently being utilised. Furthermore, 12 focus groups with fans of soccer teams will be conducted in order to identify what value fans obtain from these channels, and what content or value is absent (Edwards and Skinner, 2009; Cuneen and Tobar, 2015).

The process of data collection and analysis is in its early stages. Full results will be presented at conference.

Implications

The research will form a basis for future academic research into developing a model of best practice for digital marketing within small sports clubs. It will also help fill the gap existing within current academic literature regarding the context of small sports clubs, marketing practices of these clubs and a deeper understanding of value co-creation between sports clubs and fans.

Based on the key findings of the research, the current practices of digital marketing activities within small sports clubs will be improved to the point they become revenue realising streams.

References available on request from author.