Branding Techniques Used by Local Television Sports Broadcasters in Their Twitter Profiles

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In the world of sports media, local television sports broadcasters often report on the same stories as their competition. Whether it is a storied rivalry, a matchup between the top two teams, or a star player scoring several touchdowns, the most important game can often be easily determined. If that is the case, and all the local sports broadcasters are showing the exact same games in nearly the exact same order, what makes people watch one broadcaster over another? In many cases, it is branding that can influence which television station people will tune into, as broadcasters, and the stations they work for, use branding to separate themselves from their competition. In 2015, broadcasters have a new tool in the effort to brand themselves: Twitter. The social network allows them to create their own brand that can identify them to viewers and distinguish them from others in the market (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to examine what branding techniques local television sports broadcasters are using in their Twitter profiles. Twitter is a unique tool for the local sports broadcasters, as they are able to mix their professional and personal lives when sending messages to their followers. Therefore, it is worth examining if the broadcasters are branding themselves solely as television station employees by only focusing on their publicly known work duties, as private citizens by focusing on their personal lives, or as a combination of both their public and private personas.

Literature Review

A brand is what identifies and distinguishes a company from its competitors. Branding concepts are utilized to enhance the viability of a product and make people realize what separates it from others on the market (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). When products are similar, differentiating brands is important because companies are attempting to convince consumers to purchase their product or service instead of the competition’s (McDowell, 2004). While the idea of branding has long been used for products sold in stores, the concept of media entities as brands was not introduced until the 1990’s (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001). For television stations, these attempts at branding help the public associate specific feelings and expectations with that newscast, allowing news operations to have a competitive advantage over others in the same city (Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2001). Due to the fact that all stations in a television market will essentially provide coverage of the same events, attracting an audience based solely on news content is difficult (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008). Therefore, management leaders at news operations have recognized that branding is a proven method to entice people to tune in to the newscast (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001).

Method

In order to answer the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was undertaken. A content analysis of 200 Twitter profiles from various local sports broadcasters throughout the country was conducted to determine how broadcasters are presenting themselves. Using an iPad, a screen capture photo was taken of all 200 local sports broadcasters’ Twitter accounts. Photos were coded based Twitter handle, profile photo, header photo, contents of the biography, location, and link. Two coders (the primary researcher and a trained coder) coded 30 random profiles (15% of the sample) to determine intercoder reliability, and combining all attributes resulted in $\alpha = .959$. In order to determine why local sports broadcasters set up their Twitter profile in the manner that they did, an online survey was sent to each of the 200 broadcasters as well. In total, 113 local sports broadcasters (56.5% of the entire sample of 200) elected to participate in the survey.

Results

For the profile photo, the majority of the sample (77.5%) branded themselves strictly as local sports broadcasters by using photos of them working. Within the biography, the majority of the local sports broadcasters (65.5%) included
information both about their work responsibilities and their personal life. While it was the most populated category, less than half of the local sports broadcasters included their station call letters or station identifier in their Twitter user name (91 broadcasters, 45.5%). While the majority of local sports broadcasters have a station identifier within their username, they may not have voluntarily added it. Fewer than half of the 113 who took the survey (50) said they had an identifying mark about their current employer in their Twitter handle. Of those, 26 said that station management had instructed them to put it there. For their own personal branding purposes, some of the broadcasters felt strongly about keeping their Twitter handle only about themselves and not including station identification. Some responses included: “I want to create my own brand that lasts even after I leave [current station]” and “I built a personal brand with my existing Twitter handle, and did not want to lose that brand identity by changing it.” In addition to using Twitter as a way to deliver sports news and communicate with their followers, local sports broadcasters are recognizing the potential that Twitter has in helping to develop their own personal brand. The vast majority of participants (93.75%) said that it was important to use Twitter to create a personal brand, with over 50% of the participants (52.7%) saying that it was extremely important.

Discussion

Examining the theoretical implications of this research demonstrates that broadcasters are expanding the definition of media branding to not only include media businesses (Chan-Olmsted, 2006), but also individuals. Traditionally branding has been used by television stations for their entire product as a whole entity (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2001), but Twitter allows individuals to separate themselves from a station-wide branding effort.

While this study focused on local sports broadcasters, the practical implications are applicable to many different professions within the sports industry. Coaches, players, sports information directors, and team marketing agents are among the many public faces of a sports program that may choose to have a Twitter account. These team officials will have to decide how to brand themselves on Twitter through their biographies, usernames, and profile photos. Ultimately, the decision of how to present and brand on Twitter may depend on how the user is going to be utilizing Twitter and what their job is within the organization. If the Twitter account of a team’s director of ticket sales is going to be utilized mostly as a way to tweet about his or her family and hobbies, then it would not benefit their employer or the user to have their team name in the username. However, if that same director of ticket sales is going to primarily tweet about game promotions and ticket availability, then having the team name in his or her username would benefit both the team and the individual.