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Management Whitepaper

Examining the Development of a Social Media Strategy for a National Sport Organisation

A Case Study of Tennis New Zealand

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Sarah Gee, and Andrea N. Eagleman**

I. Research Problem

The purpose of this paper was to examine the development and maintenance of a social media strategy for a National Sport Organisation (NSO) in New Zealand. This research contains information that highlights a number of issues surrounding the development and effective utilisation of social media for an NSO, in particular applying a “one-size-fits-all” approach to its management. Other issues included constant Facebook-induced changes, lack of current social media knowledge and understanding at an organisational and sector level, and the ability to sustain an online presence. This article would likely be useful to NSOs and other stakeholders of sport organisations, particularly those involved with or considering developing a social media strategy.

II. Issues

With an ever-changing virtual landscape, sport organisations and marketers are presented with new opportunities, innovations, and challenges, most recently due to the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Many sport organisations are trying to establish a presence in this new marketing communication technology area in an effort to build and develop long-lasting stakeholder relationships and foster engagement with fans.

The rise in use and popularity of the Internet has dramatically changed the way sport organisations communicate with their stakeholders. For example, in some instances, the Internet allows for interaction, providing a unique communication channel that signals a shift away from the unilateral communication approach (e.g., television advertisements) that has previously been so dominant. While marketing with traditional media provides the opportunity to deliver one-way messages to consumers, social media is more about relationship building and conversations with consumers. These new online marketing platforms provide organisations with opportunities to connect with their fans at a level far beyond

the reach of traditional marketing. Social media also offers a more humanistic approach to the communication between brands and their public, and this has made it more accessible, inviting, and acceptable to fans as a marketing tool.

The ability to allow for two-way communication between an organisation and its fans, as well as between the fans themselves, is one of the most fundamental changes resulting from social media. Social media has provided organisations with a new means to acquire and distribute information, along with the opportunity to enter into a meaningful dialogue with fans, rather than speaking at them. These factors have long been considered important in creating strong and engaging relationships with fans, and are important as relationships generated from this mutual interest are extremely powerful in helping to develop customer loyalty. However, there are three key elements that have been proposed in order to facilitate engaging and long-lasting relationships with fans: communication, interaction, and value. Recent research has highlighted how social media can help to achieve relationship marketing goals and in turn help develop this customer loyalty.

The growth of the Internet is such that for many it is now part of everyday life. With an increasingly connected population, sport organisations now have a growing online population base with whom to connect. Studies have indicated that sports fans fit within this growing trend, and are going online more frequently for sports-related reasons. Sport organisations that effectively use the Internet as a new marketing communication tool to connect with stakeholders, such as sports fans, are seen to have a competitive advantage in what is otherwise considered an increasingly crowded virtual marketplace. The current generation of Internet users are innately familiar with two-way communication they expect their favourite sports teams, athletes, leagues and brands to communicate and connect with them via these channels. Sport organisations failing to do so risk losing not only sports fans, but also the opportunities social media provides.

For sport organisations that have struggled to gain mainstream media attention and coverage in the past, the Internet provides these organisations, through their own websites or Internet channels, the opportunity to broadcast their brand to an ever-increasing online audience. Therefore, an organisation's Internet or digital strategy should be an integral aspect of its communication and marketing plan.

III. Summary

Using Facebook Insights data collected over a six-month period, and the information provided directly by Tennis New Zealand (TNZ), three emergent themes related to the use and management of social media strategies were identified: content (quality, relevance, engagement); metrics and Return on Objectives (ROO); and barriers to engagement. Findings from this study indicated that there were three key areas that can potentially impact an organisation's ability to engage with fans. These three areas operate at organisational, sport sector, and techno-

logical levels and include Facebook-induced changes, ability to sustain an online presence, and social media knowledge and understanding.

Content was a central theme that emerged. Previous studies on social media fan engagement have suggested there are two main concepts that are essential to create an online environment that fans will respond to: (1) sharing quality and relevant content, and (2) inciting comments. While this study supports various practitioners' previous suggestions provided for ensuring the quality and relevance of the Facebook content, results from the application of those suggested for encouraging fan posts and replies provided mixed results. The most successful strategy for encouraging participation on the TNZ page was the use of questions. Conversation was encouraged by using questions at the end of status posts and through the inclusion of polls.

In order to ensure that fans were provided with a range of relevant information and content to generate interest and engagement, the key focus was on ensuring that a wide range of content was provided. For TNZ, when questioned, fans themselves via feedback received on the Facebook page, expressed a desire for a range of different post content to be presented. Facebook Insights data revealed that fans were more engaged with the Facebook page, and interaction numbers increased when post content was mixed. Fans also responded favourably to behind-the-scenes content, which included photos and video from official functions, tournament events, and player cameos.

Along with content, metrics and ROO was another central theme to emerge. For some organisations, one of the challenges faced when developing a social media strategy is determining how to measure performance and success. While some consider this a costly exercise when professional tools are utilised, the most important metrics used within this study were generated from Facebook Insights data. This included data on the number of likes, shares, and comments, together with the sentiment of content. These metrics, Insights data on active users and demographic data, provided a means to evaluate the implementation of various strategies.

Finally, as with any technological product, Facebook is constantly changing, and continually updating and re(de)fining its product. These changes have implications for those managing an organisation's Facebook presence. While some of these changes are innocuous, others may have the potential to alter the way fans interact and engage with an organisation's Facebook page. For organisations such as TNZ, the implications of Facebook-induced changes were important and highlighted the necessity to keep up to date with their modifications.

These barriers to engagement are further exacerbated by an apparent lack of understanding and knowledge of the fundamental aspects of social media that are currently present at both organisational and sector level in the sport industry. There appears to be confusion in the industry about what new media should be used for, and how to best use it to add value and contribute to the organisation.

IV. Analysis

As changes to social media features have the potential to affect the way fans interact with an organisation, it is important for organisations to keep up to date with social media platforms' policies and features. Along with this, organisations also need to ensure they maintain a sustained online presence. This is noteworthy, as a sustained online presence is critical in maintaining an organisation's brand image. The need to stay knowledgeable about these changes and the ways organisations could deal with any issues also indicated another key area affecting the ability to provide continual engagement and interaction with fans.

In order to maintain a sustained online presence and ensure communication and engagement with fans, it is suggested that organisations consider how their online presence will be managed. This is a critical issue and should be considered while developing the social media strategy, with plans put in place for the continual monitoring of it before engaging with any social media platform.

This study found that quality content is far more likely to provide higher numbers of followers and contribute to an increased level of interaction. This is important for organisations as the level of engagement or interaction is a greater measure of strategies' success at getting fans involved with an organisation's social media efforts. This engagement or interaction will assist fans in developing a long lasting relationship with the organisation. Content that adds value is also key, as it provides fans with content they are unable to get elsewhere, and thus provides an incentive for becoming a fan.

The most important metrics used within this study, which were generated from the Facebook Insights data, included likes, shares, comments, and sentiment of content. This information formed the basis for the fan feedback measure (calculated using the following data provided from Insights: likes, comments, and shares) and showcased what content type received the most engagement from fans. This information, when used alongside other metrics such as the impression count (the number of times a post is viewed anywhere on Facebook) can allow you to determine whether there are any similarities amongst posts, and make it possible to identify any trends.

One of the key issues that surround the development and effective utilisation of social media for an NSO is the application of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to its management. This is particularly important given the unique nature of the sport product. This study further supports the notion that this sort of approach is not appropriate when dealing with social media. In order to develop a successful social media strategy, organisations need to have a strong understanding of their fans' behaviour and what it is they want out of their social media experience. Strategies that were found to be successful for other organisations were not always received with the same level of enthusiasm by TNZ fans, and therefore, strategies had to be tailored to the TNZ market based on feedback from evaluation and metric analysis.

In order to develop a successful strategy, stakeholders involved in its development need a clear understanding of how social media fits within the organisation, how and by whom the social media strategy will be managed, what their fans expect out of their social media experience, and clear guidelines for how success will be measured.

V. Discussion/Implications

For many small sports organisations, as has proven to be the case with TNZ, there may not be the resources (time, money, or staff) to provide dedicated social media personnel to maintain an organisation's online presence. However, it is imperative for organisations, in order to maintain a strong brand image, to establish strategies to ensure that this critical area is addressed. It is therefore suggested that organisations engaging in social media include within their strategy a dedicated section outlining how and by whom their online presence will be managed.

One of the keys to using social media successfully is the need for continual communication, and as the name suggests, *social* interaction. It is critical that organisations ensure that they deliver content that supports the building of conversations with fans. This can be achieved by focusing on the nature of the content provided, ensuring its quality and relevance. The key is to ensure that the content provided to fans adds value. However, one of the challenges that organisations face is achieving the right balance. While an organisation's brand will suffer if it is considered a "spammer" by current or potential fans, it will be equally detrimental if they do not maintain a constant connection with fans. The use of Facebook's Insights data provides organisations with metrics on the most appropriate approach relevant to their fans.

In order to maintain this constant connection, organisations need to ensure that it is clear who will be responsible for the management of any social media profiles. Whether this requires a dedicated member of staff or the use of existing staff to manage and monitor online media will largely be dependent on the individual organisation and the level of resources available.

One of the most important aspects that contributes to the success of an organisation's social media strategy is the internal usage and buy-in from everybody associated with the organisation. Good social media does not start and end with the manager. Instead, it should be integrated throughout the organisation. This will ensure that an organisation's social media presence reflects its entire organisation. In the case of TNZ, this would include interactions and content from each of the regions the NSO is responsible for, ensuring that fans are presented with a complete view of tennis in New Zealand. Previous research has shown that it will also generate engagement and empower staff to use social media to raise the profile of their sport.

In order for social media use to be successful, it is imperative that sport managers and those associated with an organisation's marketing communications, have the appropriate knowledge and understanding of this emerging field. Without this

knowledge, inadequate expectations and inappropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) are likely to be set (if they are set at all). For those organisations with a fragmented organisational structure, this task can be hampered by the number of people involved and the geographical spread of resources, but it is essential that this is considered in order to deliver an effective social media presence. If an organisation can ensure successful buy-in from all parties, then this will greatly reduce the associated challenges.

Given that social media is an emerging marketing tool, ongoing research on this topic is warranted. In a rapidly changing and evolving sports environment, where the adoption of technology is both an intrinsic part of the way sport is played and consumed, keeping abreast with such developments, particularly on the consumption (demand) side, will become increasingly relevant for sport organisations.