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## Understanding Professional Sport Organizations Use of Facebook

### Abstract

Facebook has rapidly grown since its inception in 2004. Due to this the purpose of this study is to find out what sport organizations are doing to interact with fans on their Facebook pages. Content analysis was performed to place 930 Facebook posts by sport organizations into one of four categories: interactivity, diversion, content, and promotional (Table-1). This research is important because social media is a growing industry. The study of NFL teams concluded 49% Content, 33% Interactivity, 11% Diversion, and 8% Promotional. The study of NHL teams concluded 35% Content, 17% Interactivity, 34% Diversion, and 14% Promotional.

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## Understanding Professional Sport Organizations Use of Facebook

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St. John Fisher College

April 27, 2012

### **Abstract**

Facebook has rapidly grown since its inception in 2004. Due to this the purpose of this study is to find out what sport organizations are doing to interact with fans on their Facebook pages.

Content analysis was performed to place 930 Facebook posts by sport organizations into one of four categories: interactivity, diversion, content, and promotional (Table-1). This research is important because social media is a growing industry. The study of NFL teams concluded 49% Content, 33% Interactivity, 11% Diversion, and 8% Promotional. The study of NHL teams concluded 35% Content, 17% Interactivity, 34% Diversion, and 14% Promotional.

### **Understanding Professional Sports Organizations Use of Facebook**

The online social network Facebook is the world's largest social network, with 800 million users worldwide as of September 2011 (Wyld, 2011). Since its debut in February, 2004 many professional sports teams have used it to connect with fans (Fisher, 2008). The Miami Heat launched the "Shop HEAT" Facebook store in December of 2010, becoming the first NBA team to launch an exclusive retail store within Facebook (McGarry, 2011). The Cleveland Indians have started offering discounts on tickets through Facebook in their most recent social media campaign (McGarry, 2011). Teams can also use Facebook to share information with fans directly rather than going through media outlets. Because social media is becoming so popular it is essential for teams to find a way to harness the power of Facebook and turn it into revenue for the organization. To do this the team must understand how to effectively communicate with fans.

To understand why teams are using Facebook it is best to understand what Facebook promises to offer in their principles of operation.

The goal of Facebook is to make the world more open and transparent, which they believe will create greater understanding and connection. Facebook promotes openness and transparency by giving individuals greater power to share and connect, and certain principles guide Facebook in pursuing these goals. Achieving these principles should be constrained only by limitations of law, technology, and evolving social norms. (Facebook Principles, 2011, para. 1)

To do this Facebook users can post messages, upload pictures, and share information. They can also follow the posts of others, which range from insignificant posts about what they are doing day to day or important posts about breaking news. This allows teams to post messages from their official Facebook page that may help clear up rumors or speculations, and also allows them to be the ones that break the news rather than relying on main-stream media outlets they may

bend the truth to attract attention.

Facebook allows fans to connect with the team beyond breaking news and game recaps. The New York Knicks are looking to use social media to reconnect with their fans. Howard Jacobs, executive vice president for marketing and sales at the MSG Sports unit of Madison Square Garden says “we want fans to engage on a more regular and active basis on all the platforms: come to the Garden, watch on the MSG network, come to events, text in, upload pictures to Facebook, follow the players on Twitter” (Elliott, 2010, para. 9). The fact that Jacobs is referring to Facebook shows how valuable of a tool it is to help when reaching out to fans.

In the NHL the New Jersey Devils owner Jeff Vanderbeek says “It makes good business sense to listen to the teams’ fans because they are customers, or can be” (Caldwell, 2011, para. 1). It goes to show the importance of social media if the owner of a team is stating that he believes it is essential to use Facebook to draw closer with the fan. Because a team’s Facebook page allows fans worldwide to see their content it provides a great way to increase brand awareness. For example the Green Bay Packers have a running blog titled “Ask Vic” which allows fans to submit questions to the Packers own blog specialist Vic Ketchman who then asks the fans questions at press-conferences leading up to the game and post game. The Dallas Cowboys use their Facebook page to promote their partnership with The Salvation Army, by frequently posting links to another website where fans can donate money to help The Salvation Army (Megan, 2011).

Social media allows fans access to their favorite sports team that they cannot get anywhere else. This access allows the fans to engage with the team which includes greater frequency of attending games (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), more time and money invested in the team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and greater intentions to purchase a team sponsor’s

products (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). This goes to show why sport teams should use Facebook to target potential consumers, because the interactions may lead to more revenue.

Popular media such as television shows (ESPN) and magazine or newspaper articles have been the norm for communication between teams and fans for a long time. Unfortunately because social media is so new there is little research on how it works and its effectiveness. Because of this the purpose of this research is to examine the content of professional sport organizations Facebook posts and explore the relationship between teams and fans.

### **Literature Review**

Audi of America's general manager for social media and customer engagement Doug Clark says "Today the equation to measure that (if social media has an influence on buying decisions) doesn't exist" (Manjoo, 2011, para. 4). Because social media is so new, everyone is doing it and nobody knows why, it's just popular and because of that companies are willing to spend money even though they aren't guaranteed a specific outcome. EMarketer, a digital intelligence company that "publishes data, analyzes digital marketing, media and commerce", estimates that 80% of companies will participate in social-media marketing this year, nearly double the number of just three years ago (Manjoo, 2011, para. 6). Because there is no concrete way to measure the effectiveness or impact of a social media campaign sport organizations are proceeding cautiously yet swiftly into the world of social media. Before popular forms of social media if an individual wanted to know information about a team they would have to go to the chat, forum, or blog and ask the question and then wait for a response. Now with Facebook you can go to the team's page and have endless amounts of information that can be found with a few clicks. This is because on Facebook the team or other fans can respond to your questions.

The 800 million Facebook users make up more than one-tenth of the world's population (Wyld, 2011). This is exactly why sports organizations are blindly spending money to expand their social media presence. In an article released by Yahoo! Sports as of December 7, 2011 the Los Angeles Lakers were the most popular sports team on Facebook in America with 11 million Facebook fans (Maller, 2011). This number actually makes them fourth world wide behind Manchester United, Real Madrid, and FC Barcelona (Maller, 2011). Although no sport team is even close to having a majority of the entire Facebook community, these fans are active. Not only teams benefit from the frequency and amount of Facebook users, third party companies such as Ticketmaster also benefits. Facebook released research of the effectiveness of their "like" button which showed that every time a user posted on their wall that they bought a ticket from Ticketmaster.com their friends spend an additional \$5.30 on Ticketmaster.com (Helft, 2011). This means that their friends clicked the link that showed up on their wall and also purchased tickets (likely to the same event). This marks one of the first times there has been a direct link between sharing on Facebook and revenue generation (Helft, 2011).

Many teams are looking to build off the success of E-commerce on Facebook such as the Nation Basketball Association who has recently launched its own virtual game on Facebook called NBA Legend. NBA Legend allows Facebook users to create an avatar, join their favorite team, and follow a simulated career (Brustein, 2011). Brian Perez, the senior vice president and general manager of the league's digital operations says "NBA Legend is a way to keep fans engaged in basketball even when no games are being played (Brustein, 2011)." The NBA looks to gain revenue from this game through persuading fans to purchase virtual shoes, sports drinks and other products that they will use to improve the performance of their avatar (Brustein, 2011). Also the NBA is looking to create deals with sponsors who will pay to market virtual items

within the game (Brustein, 2011). This breakthrough is important because it gives leagues and teams another way to capitalize off of social media.

Computer users are already accessing sport information via the Internet; 39% of people who had access to a personal computer in 2000 used it to access sport information online (Brown, 2003). Of NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB fans, approximately 72% checked sports scores online in 2000 (Seo, 2008). These statistics show that interaction with fans via the internet is very important. As Seo and Green (2008) point out in their study there is little research focused on social media and the needs of the user. To find out the needs of the end user Seo and Green used 10 factors consisting of information, entertainment, interpersonal communication, escape, pass time, fanship, team support, content, economic, technical knowledge. Seo and Green used these 10 facets to breakdown the motives of those who use the Internet for sports information. Like Seo and Green (2008) this research will focus on the end users perception of in this case the teams Facebook page. Another study that observed how the end users' gained satisfaction was study done is 2008 by Galen Clavio, this study focused on the uses and gratification of Internet collegiate sport message board users. The four factors Clavio found most common were interactivity, information gathering, diversion, and argumentation. Clavio used these factors to show what users expected out of sport message boards and how these factors affected their use of the message boards. A third study that has already looked at this type of information is Understanding Professional Athletes' Use of Twitter in which a group of researchers from the University of Louisville conduct a content analysis of athlete tweets. From this research they were able to better understand how athletes were using their twitter profiles and find ways athletes could benefit from using their twitter profiles differently. Not much is known about how teams interact with their fans via Facebook. Due to this the purpose of this study will

be to perform a content analysis of all NFL and NHL teams Facebook pages. This information will help understand how teams interact with their fans on Facebook. Also this study will determine what teams can do better when interacting with fans on Facebook.

## **Method**

### **Sample Selection**

Two leagues that are in season over the winter months were selected for this research. Each team in these two leagues, NFL (32 teams) NHL (30 teams) had their Facebook posts examined. Using SportsFanGraph.com, a Website devoted to tracking Facebook and Twitter followers of almost every sport, teams were ranked by the number of Facebook followers they have.. Content analysis was done for the 15 most recent posts (the entire first page of posts on a user's wall) on each team Facebook page. With a total of 62 teams, this meant that 930 posts total was used (Table 1).

### **Definition of Variables**

Each post will be analyzed and grouped into one of four categories. Taking the 10 facets of sport online users' motives examined by Seo and Green (2008), Clavio (2008) who studied the use of intercollegiate athletics message boards, and what was already used in the study of Professional Athletes' Use of Twitter (2010) the four categories to be used are interactivity, diversion, content, and promotional.

- *Interactivity* is a professional athlete's direct communication with fans. Clavio defined interactivity as message-board users "giving input and opinions, participating in discussions, communicating with fellow fans, and sharing information" (2008, p. viii). The current study modified the category to reflect the conversations teams have with other fans on Facebook through responses to posts.

- *Diversion* is non-sports-related information provided by professional sport organizations. Posts in the diversion category can range from links to sponsors websites, coupons or asking fans to donate to a community charity. Clavio (2008) defined diversion as "non-sports related elements of message boards, including politics, religion, staying in touch with old classmates, and non-athletic news about the user's alma mater" (p. viii). Similarly, the current study used diversion to reflect any teams' posts with a non-sports message.
- *Content* includes access to pictures, videos, blogs or a team's official Web site. The category is one of the 10 facets mentioned by Seo and Green (2008) as motives to use the Internet to consume sports. Their content facet was listed as the "motive to see photos and download media" (p. 86).
- *Promotional* is publicity regarding sponsorships, upcoming games, and related promotions such as discounted tickets or giveaways. The category derives from Seo and Green's (2008) economic facet, which they defined as the "motive to get promotional incentives that a team provides" (p. 86).

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data was collected Saturday January 14, 2012. By looking at each individual teams Facebook page a content analysis was conducted of the team's wall posts. The wall posts was categorized into one of the four categories listed above. Once all data is collected it was put into an Excel spreadsheet and a breakdown on the posts will be provided through charts and graphs as well as a written explanation of each visual.

## Data Analysis

By following the methods sections and categorizing each post into one of the four possible categories outlined in the Methods section a chi-squared test will be used because this test is best used for "non-parametric nominal data" (Jones, 2010, p.233). Chi-squared test is defined as "comparing the actual, or reported, frequencies of a given variable with the frequencies that would be expected if the data was to suggest no differences between groups" (Jones, 2010, p.233). The variables of the test will be each team and their posts while the groups of the test will be any one of the four categories.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to perform a content analysis of Facebook posts of each NFL and NHL team. The results for the NFL were 49% Content, 11% Diversion, 33% Interactivity, and 8% Promotional. Based on these results it can be said that the NFL teams are drastically underutilizing the promotional side of Facebook. The results for the NHL were 35% content, 17% Diversion, 34% interactivity, and 14% Promotional. These results show that the NHL teams also under utilize the promotional aspects of Facebook. While performing a chi-squared test on my data it concluded that there was no variation between posts. For the NFL content posts had a value of 320 with 310 degrees of freedom and a significance of .366. Diversion posts had a value of 160 with 155 degrees of freedom and a significance of .375. Interactivity posts also had value of 320 with 310 degrees of freedom and a significance of .366. And Promotional posts also had a value of 160 with 155 degrees of freedom and a significance of .375. The chi-squared test also resulted in no correlation between posts for the NHL as well. Content posts had a value of 300 with 290 degrees of freedom and a significance of .331. Diversion posts had a value of 150 with 145 degrees of freedom and a significance of .371.

Interactivity posts had a value of 160 with 155 degrees of freedom and a significance of .375. And Promotional posts had a value of 150 with 145 degrees of freedom and a significance of .371.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a content analysis of NFL and NHL teams Facebook pages and use the information to show how teams were interacting with their fans. Both leagues Facebook posts were a mainly content related posts with interactivity posts second. It is very important that teams involve fans in their social media campaign because according to Wann & Branscombe, 1993 the more engaged the team is with the fans the greater the fans frequency of attending games and the more time and money they will invest in the team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Unfortunately teams did not focus on promotional or diversion posts as much. Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008 stated that the more involved a fan was with the team the greater their intentions would be to purchase a team sponsor's products (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). These promotional and diversion posts could allow teams to make more money off their Facebook pages by charging companies to advertise on their page.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

Due to the low number of diversion and promotional posts it may be possible the NFL and Facebook has guidelines that restricts selling ad space. From my research it can be concluded that teams are using their Facebook to copy and paste content from its website. This may be due to the fact that everyone is still nervous about Facebook and if it will last unlike myspace.com. Based on the success of social media it may be safe to say that even if Facebook isn't forever the platform that we use, that social media/networking is here to stay and teams should invest considerable time and money into building social media into their front office staff.

My research also concluded that teams in both the NHL and NFL need to increase their amount of promotional and diversion posts. They should use Facebook as a money maker by offering sponsors a link to their website on the teams Facebook that will be viewed by the millions of fans that view the page daily.

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Table 1.

