INTERNET MARKETING AND FOOTBALL CLUBS: INVESTIGATING THE PROGRESS OF THE GREEK FOOTBALL CLUBS' WEB SITES

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide use of the Internet by business and commerce has recently increased dramatically. Indeed, many commentators now claim that the Internet is leading to a new period in marketing. Sports, and especially football clubs which have become increasingly commercial in recent times, have not been unassailable to such rapid developments and they utilize the Internet as a marketing medium through which clubs can communicate with supporters, establish relationships with them and sell products and services. More specifically, football clubs have the opportunity to accomplish plenty of marketing activities. These activities are:

- The Internet as a sales point (Chadwick, Tapp and Beech, 1999).
- The Internet as an informational point (Tapp, Beech and Chadwick, 1998),
- The internet as a communicational tool (Hoey, 1998, Ashcroft and Hoey, 2001).
- The internet as a promotional tool (Beech, Chadwick and Tapp, 2000a, 2000b).
- The Internet as a market research, segmentation and targeting tool (Paul, 1996).

The purpose of this particular research was to examine what progress has been achieved in the content of the web sites of the most successful Greek football clubs from the perspective of marketing in relation to the research, undertaken by the authors in 2002 and investigate a comparison between the two studies.

METHODS

To ascertain the above broad aim, it was therefore important to use the same methodology, non-participant observation, utilized in the past research (2002) and to examine the same research areas, as they have arisen from the literature: selling and informational features, promotional and communication features and data collection features.

The 25 – item form, used in the past research (2002), was utilized for this particular research. The 25 items of the form consisted of five units based on the areas of research mentioned above. The questions were open-ended and the sample of the particular research was the same football clubs from the Greek football league that had been used in the 2002 research by the author. These clubs were: Panathinaikos, Olympiakos, Paok, Aek, Aris and Iraklis.

The data for this particular research were analyzed under the five headings according to the objectives of the particular research mentioned above. The first concern was to find out the exact features and services of the above categories and to classify into a table. The second concern was to compare the two tables (the table derived from the present research and the table derived from the past research), in order to find out the progress has been achieved in the content of the Greek web sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Informational features

The recent research in the web sites proved that all sites provide various and rich information about the club (statistics, historical data, information about the club, updated club news, teams' results and table fixtures). The comparison between the past and the recent research showed a little progress, as in the recent research

all web sites provide wide information about sport facilities (stadium, training centre) and many of them give information about youth football academies. Thus, the Internet continues to operate as an excellent information storage medium and a great mean for information exchange for the football clubs.

Selling features

The past research showed poor performance in the selling features. E – commerce (ticket sales and merchandising sales) was undeveloped; cyber products and corporate hospitality arrangements were almost non existent. The present research has shown little progress in this area. Thus, some of the teams have arranged ticket and merchandising sales through Internet and have configured crucial issues of e -commerce (secure transactions, professional presentation of on-line catalogue, convenience of shopping and variety of delivery methods). Moreover, some clubs provide cyber products (screensavers, wallpapers, co operations with mobile enterprises, etc.). However, Greek web sites have not yet achieved the level of sophistication that other web sites demonstrate (e.g, UK football clubs, sports clubs of USA, etc). Football clubs' web sites need to consider more carefully the selling features of the Internet in order to increase the volume of transactions over the Internet and consequently to increase revenue from electronic commerce.

Promotional features

The comparison of the two studies showed a little progress in the promotional features. All web sites promote the sponsors of the teams and others products (especially their own products, such as official journals). However, all sites fail to provide advertisements of other companies in order to raise more income. Some of the sites promote supporters clubs and junior supporters, while all web sites continue to not promote community and public relations activities. Thus, although it has been achieved progress between the two studies, the web sites remain unsophisticated in the particular area, as they fail to exploit extensively the promotional features of the Internet.

Communicational features

The web sites do not exploit effectively the interactive features of the Internet. Many football clubs provide audio – visual content (photographs, team's song, video games, etc.), links with other sport related web sites and some of the sites offer competitions and forum services. Even though web sites have achieved progress in this category, they have failed to provide on-line video broadcasting of matches (only one web site provides live streaming of the home games). Moreover, all web sites make use of the e-mail service. However, this service is only used for contacts with the administration team. Thus, managers have failed to provide fans with direct contact to the players and managers; have failed to use the e-mail for promotional and communicational purposes. To conclude, web sites have achieved progress in the communicational features, however managers need to think carefully about the exploitation of the interactive nature of the Internet in order to increase site traffic and engage fans to a continuous relationship with the club.

Data collection features

No one web site has exploited the potential of collecting data directly from the site users. However, they ask for data from customers occasionally. That means that people that want to access the site only for information (club' news, history, etc) can move anonymously around the site. Thus, football managers are still losing the opportunity to track and target specific groups of supporters, develop direct communications with them and meet their demands by customizing products and services and finally develop one-to-one marketing and relationship marketing.

To sum up, football clubs' web sites have achieved some progress in the marketing features of the Internet. However, based on the evidence of this study, web sites remain poorly developed, unsophisticated and lack strong links with the marketing activities that the Internet can offer. They still seem to be unsure what role the Internet should play in their marketing and general activities. Thus, they still do not exploit effectively all the interactive features of the Internet, they do not promote clubs' activities and offers and they do not address crucial issues like segmentation and targeting of their fans. Football clubs, if they want to exploit the potential that the Internet offers, need to think more carefully about how and why they use it and about the implications for marketing that the Internet can offer.

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