

Social media for community relationship management in Russian sport clubs

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Abstract keywords

social media, business communication, sport marketing, community relationship management, CRM, hockey club

Research question

The rise of social media (SM) in the past few years had an impact on management tools and techniques. This influence is vividly seen in marketing, event and customer relationship management (CRM). The majority of sport clubs around the world use SM for various purposes: advertising, attracting new customers, and maintaining connection with community. The study reveals peculiarities of SM usage in general and focuses on their value for community relationship management (CoRM) as a topic of interest. The aim of the paper is to provide the preliminary analysis of SM practises employed by the leading Russian clubs of Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). One of the main objectives is also to summarise the experience and highlight the burning issues within the topic.

Theoretical background

A growing body of international research provides insights into the benefits of putting to use SM in sport (eg., Clavio, Kian, 2010; Williams, Chinn, 2010). Scholars and sport managers admit the need for research on social networks landscape, their effective application and evaluation (Wallace, 2011). SM as digital channel of marketing communication is presented in various analytical reports and is the most developed question within the topic (Porter et al., 2011). Modern CRM systems gather detailed information about followers and fans to the customer database from their social network profiles. Ang suggests the term "CoRM" because members of brand communities or official groups in SM are not necessarily customers of one's organization (Ang, 2011). CoRM also underlines the importance of communication not only between customers and company (classical CRM model) but customers and partners between each other (many-to-many CoRM model). Moreover in sport the community itself plays a very important role as a unit of sport clubs' business model based on emotional cohesion and social networking. "4Cs" model of CoRM according to Ang includes connectivity, conversations, content creation and collaboration (Ang, 2011). In the framework of sport the fifth "C" may be added to this model as "cohesion" under which we understand emotional bonds, devotion to team and community of fans.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

In an effort to investigate the general SM issues and give the theoretical overview the desktop analysis of academic

literature was used. For the study top ten Russian hockey clubs were chosen. The content-analysis of the clubs' official Facebook and Vkontakte (the most popular Russian social network) pages included such parameters as number of followers, "likes", topics, form of communication (video, photo, links, status, notes), frequency of update and general on-line community strategy. In order to expose the way SM is used for CoRM purposes on-line questionnaires were sent to the managers and members of the community. The data was analysed with the help of "SPSS Statistics" software and descriptive statistical analysis.

Results, discussion and conclusions

The findings from this study revealed that the key problem is the lack of specialists and theoretical studies reflecting implication features of SM in the Russian sport industry. Four of the top ten KHL clubs with a huge community of fans do not have SM accounts. Some Facebook pages with more than 2,500 followers are not official and not managed properly. The prevailing form of communication (N=1512) is status updates – 63%, photo uploads – 21%, video – 14%, links – 1%. Frequency of update depends on the games played and season: spring – 37%, summer 6%. Respondents' answers showed the absence of on-line community strategy and managers are unclear as to how SM can be used to benefit their sport organisations. They neither try to attract more followers nor organise campaigns increasing ticket sales or brand awareness through getting more "likes". Two clubs have CRM systems integrated with social networks and only one club generated an offer according to the social profiles' data but did not evaluate the result. Three clubs encourage many-to-many communication, open topics for discussion and ask questions that have from 7 to 284 comments. For members of the community conversations play the most important role (38%) but cohesion (29%) is also significant. Implications of CoRM featured as prospective and one of the future directions is closely related with thorough investigation in this field. Further we plan to analyse the best practices and work out some practical guidelines for Russian sport clubs.

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