

Developing a global NFL brand one tweet at a time

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AIM OF THE ABSTRACT

The National Football League (NFL) is the most popular spectator sport in the United States. However, as suggested by Ross and Walsh (2011), as traditional marketplaces become saturated it is essential for sport organizations to look for ways to extend their brand on a more global scale. While the NFL is still at the developmental stages of reaching its full global potential, the league has made significant progress. The NFL International Series will once again play three regular season contests in London in 2015, which are supported by a variety of events leading up to the games. In addition, there have been reports that the NFL would like to place a full-time franchise and host a Super Bowl in London. However, international competition is only one of the ways in which an organization can create global brand equity.

Social media use is another key way in which sport organizations can create a global brand equity (Ross & Walsh, 2011). The NFL currently has six official Twitter accounts which they utilize to communicate with their growing global fan base. Those six accounts include @nfl (their main account), @nfluk, @nfl_china, @nflcanada, @nflmx (mexico), and @nfljapan. Despite the emphasis leagues are placing on extending their brand in the global marketplace, and the use of Twitter as an avenue to do so, no research to date has attempted to examine how leagues are utilizing Twitter to position their brand globally. As such, the purpose of this study is to compare the NFL's messaging across all six of their Twitter accounts to understand how the NFL is communicating with fans and promoting their brand globally through Twitter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The last decade has seen tremendous growth in sport social media research with a particular focus on examining Twitter as a way for organizations to reach and engage with consumers. Specifically, research has examined topics such as how athletes are using Twitter (e.g., Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010) and consumer motivations for using Twitter (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010). However, as suggested by Wallace, Wilson, and Miloch (2011), little attention has been paid to organizational messaging in social media research. Thus, the present study will add to social media literature by examining the NFL's organizational/brand messaging across their six Twitter accounts.

While a majority of Twitter research has focused on athlete and event usage, two studies have examined social media and the relationship between the organization and its brand through Facebook (Wallace et al., 2011; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszk, 2013). Both studies concluded that social media is a powerful communication tool which can have a positive impact on sport brands. Specifically, Walsh et al. (2013) determined that those who followed a major collegiate event's Facebook page rated the event's brand personality characteristics higher than non-followers. Wallace et al. (2011) also determined that Facebook is a viable tool to highlight brand attributes and associations, and to build relationships with consumers. While these and other like studies are important to understanding social medias impact on brands, the current study will extend this line of research to the impact Twitter may have on developing a global sports brand.

METHODOLOGY

In order to properly evaluate the language and brand associations highlighted by the NFL in the six identified accounts, approximately 3,200 tweets will be gathered from each of the accounts during two separate time periods, March 2015 and August 2015, allowing for the observation of messages during the last months of the 2014 season and the entire 2015 offseason. Once collected, these tweets will be analyzed using the software program Leximancer, a computer-aided text analyzer which evaluates word combinations and provides word clusters for qualitative analysis. The software output will allow for comparison of language between the six accounts, and will provide a level of detailed analysis that normal qualitative coding cannot provide.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As data collection is currently in progress, results will be presented at the conference and provide a first look into how a global sports property is utilizing social media to position its brand in multiple world regions simultaneously. The insights gained will allow for greater understanding of global sport brand positioning, the brand associations stressed across the accounts, integration of social media into the marketing mix, and the theoretical implications of communicating with users across geographical boundaries in cyberspace. These insights have the potential to be applied to other global sports brands, including football, auto racing, and basketball.

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