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## CASE STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SUMMER COLLEGIATE BASEBALL LEAGUE

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Synopsis:

Minor league baseball provides unique entertainment experiences extending beyond the sport. The ability to connect with the fanbase is critical for smaller communities to successfully operate their team. Relationship-marketing potentially provides one means of understanding and developing mutually beneficial relationships for both team and fan. Social media has emerged as a tool for sport organizations to interact with fans for the purpose of both communication and meaningful dialogue. However, the ability of sport organizations to successfully develop a relationship dialogue resulting in mutual value is still at question. This case study extends the work of Abeza, O'Reilly, and Reid (2013) by both replicating their work within the context of a different sport and examining the challenges and opportunities faced by both teams and fans when social media is part of the team's relationship-marketing strategies.

Abstract:

Minor league baseball provides unique entertainment experiences extending beyond the sport. Collegiate summer leagues offer opportunities for player development, fan entertainment, and enjoyment of baseball. The ability to connect with the fanbase is critical for smaller communities to successfully operate their team. Greater team-fan connections result in a better understanding of what brings fans to games allowing sport marketers and organizations to create better fan experiences. Relationship-marketing potentially provides one means of understanding and developing mutually beneficial relationships for both team and fan. As more individuals use social networking sites, social media has emerged as a tool for sport organizations to interact with fans for the purpose of both communication and meaningful dialogue. However, the ability of sport organizations to successfully develop a relationship dialogue resulting in mutual value is still at question. This case study extends the work of Abeza, O'Reilly, and Reid (2013) by both replicating their work within the context of a different sport and examining the challenges

and opportunities faced by both teams and fans when social media is part of the team's relationship-marketing strategies.

#### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Berry (2002, p. 61) defines relationship-marketing as "attracting, maintaining, and -in multi-service organizations -enhancing customer relationships." He subsequently suggests that relationship-marketing meets a customer's needs and/or wants at the highest level. The ability to obtain service excellence thereby enhances customers trust. Without trust relationship-marketing cannot occur. Grönroos (2004) provides key processes of relationship-marketing including communication, interaction and value. For relationship-marketing to occur communication, while planned and integrated into organization's communication strategy, is a two-way process adapting to customer needs and wants at each point. The interaction process, while stemming from planned communication, prompts dialogue between organization and customer. Dialogue creates shared knowledge. Finally, while customer value is an outcome of the relationship-marketing process it is also created via the interactions between organization and customer. Williams and Chinn (2010) acknowledge that the initiation of the relationship-marketing process may not solely be organizationally based with the increase of social media. They therefore acknowledge the role of prosumers, or online members who serve as influencers, within relationship-marketing processes outlined by Grönroos (2004).

Sports like other service oriented industries do not have an unlimited supply of potential customers. Hence, sport organizations have adopted relationship-marketing as a means to attract, maintain, and enhance relationships with their customers. This is not without challenges and opportunities with the emergence of social media. Abeza et al. (2013) developed a framework outlining the opportunities and challenges associated with relationship-marketing tactics and social media from sport organization's perspective. A few opportunities presented include better knowledge of customers and interaction with customers while challenges included information credibility and reliability and difficulties identifying true customers. These opportunities align with research suggesting athletic departments perceive the benefits of their social media use as immediate connection between fan and beloved team assisting in team loyalty enhancement (Hipke & Hachtmann, 2014).

#### METHODOLOGY

Replicating and extending the work of Abeza et al. (2013) the case study will use a qualitative approach to determine the challenges and opportunities faced by the teams and its fans. The investigation will use a purposeful sample of teams participating in a Summer Collegiate League in Western Kentucky. The league consists of five teams composing the regional league. All teams have agreed to participate in the investigation. Communities with franchises range in population from 2,295 to 58,416. The data collection process includes in-depth interviews of organizational members responsible for social media development and relationship-marketing and team fans. One-on-one interviews will use a semi-structured question format. Interview questions follow the relationship-marketing approach in sport conceptual framework (Abeza et al., 2013). Researchers plan to tape and transcribe all interviews. A content

analysis of Facebook, social media that teams have in common, will occur the first month of the season. Facebook will be monitored one time weekly. Facebook coding scheme coincides with the relationship-marketing approach in sport conceptual framework (Abeza et al., 2013). Data analysis includes pattern matching of sport organizational member interview data and Facebook content analysis with the relationship-marketing approach in sport conceptual framework. Transcribed fan interviews will be analyzed looking for themes suggesting challenges and opportunities as related to social media and relationship-marketing from the fan perspective.

## RESULTS

Due to the timing of the season interviews will begin in April. The content analysis of the team's Facebook begins in June. The researchers guarantee completion of analysis and presentation of findings, implications, and future research consideration at EASM 2015.

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