

Social Media Use In Finnish Sports Leagues

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The objective of the project

Social media has provided sport organisations unparalleled access to their audiences. Fans can be reached directly through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms. In addition, social media has given sport organisations new opportunities to collaborate with sponsors. (See an extensive review by Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015.) However, in order to reap the benefits promised by social media, sport organisations need to build social media strategies that take into account what they are trying to achieve and with what means. The project reviewed and analysed social media communication in two sports leagues in Finland.

Theoretical background

The project builds on two theoretical lenses. Firstly, leaning on service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) we presume that, in the context of sport, value is co-created among the nexus partners, i.e. sponsoring companies, sport organisations, and sport consumers. The value arises, for example, when consumers engage with the sponsored club in a way which creates positive buying intentions towards the sponsors' products, inspires positive word-of-mouth or deepens customer loyalty. Secondly, adapting the uses and gratification theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973), we assume that social media can be a fruitful context for value co-creation only if sport organisations are able to communicate with their stakeholders (particularly fans) in a way that meet these stakeholders' specific needs.

The design and implementation of the project

In order to understand the social media use in sport organisations, we conducted case studies within two top sport leagues (15 professional ice hockey clubs and 14 semi-professional floorball clubs) in Finland.

The project was conducted as follows: Firstly, with the help of Futusome Ltd (www.futusome.io), a total of 3014 messages from 29 clubs' official Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts were collected. We used a 10-day period in which all clubs played at least one home and one away match. Secondly, all messages were read and analysed by using inductive content analysis. Thirdly, focusing on the literal content of the messages, the tones of the messages and the enclosed photos, links, hashtags and emojis, we identified several social media functions performed by sport clubs.

Results

We identified four social media functions which are crucial for value co-creation. These functions are: i) providing information about game results, offering team news, and justifying players' and coaches' transfers, ii) collaborating with sponsors and other commercialisation activities including game promotion and merchandising, iii) communicating and engaging with fans, and iv) building social ties with the local community in order to speak to more people than the existing fan base. In doing so, our findings congruence with Filo et al. (2015), who found that social media use in sport context can be interpreted through the lenses of service-dominant logic.

The analysis showed that clubs' social media communication is focused on information activities. Numbers vary from club to club but, on average, nearly 60 percent of clubs' social media messages were classified in this category. Clubs provide information before, during and after the games, and explain management decisions. The second most common function was commercialisation. Roughly speaking, in every fifth message clubs provide social media coverage to sponsors, advertise upcoming games, and promote fan merchandise. A bit surprisingly, fan communication and engagement was just the third most common objective. It is a surprise because social media by its very definition is about interaction. Approximately in 15 percent of the messages we found interaction and engagement. Building social ties with the community and enlarging the clubs' fan base was not the top priority of any club. Less than 10 percent of the messages were classified in this category.

We recommend two main development areas for clubs' social media communication. Firstly, social media should be seen as an arena for showing congruence between sponsors and clubs. Instead of traditional company-consumer communication, social media emphasises human-human interaction. We encourage clubs and players to leverage their ties with sponsoring brands via subtle mentions on social media platforms in the form of status updates, pictures containing the sponsor's product, or links to other online

content tied to the sponsor. Secondly, we deem social media as a context in which individuals can express their attachments with others who share similar interests, values and practices. Clubs benefit if their fans use social media to express their social identity and foster social interaction beyond the immediate environment. Social media is a convenient forum for fans to express togetherness and distinctiveness. Clubs cannot manage identity building, but they can enable it. The key thing is that clubs use social media for inviting sport fans to co-create content.

References

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