



Sports clubs' use of social media to increase spectator interest

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social media
Facebook
Football clubs
Spectator interest
Customer interactivity

ABSTRACT

This research aims to give an insight into social media as an online marketing medium used by sports clubs. The research intention is to understand how social media is used to increase customer interactivity and spectator interest. We applied two integrated methods including one new scale to analyse and identify website interactivity and Facebook interactivity of the thirty-two football clubs involved in the 2014–2015 European Champions Cup. Six, seven-point items were used in the scale to measure the degree to which a person believes a website allows a free flow of information. A Pearson correlation of the Facebook pages was used to explore the strength of the relationship between two variables, analysing spectator interactivity. It was found that greater customer interactivity through social media can be deemed attractive and can increase spectatorship. The research also found that the level of website interactivity of a particular football club is not dependent upon their performance within the tournament. Those clubs who perform well, or are in a higher pool in the European Champions, do not appear to engage better with their spectators than the lower pools. The multiple regression results further confirmed these findings. The findings have important implications, which primarily suggest that social media is an effective form of marketing and can be useful in attracting spectators to a sports organization, if used appropriately.

1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand how social media is employed within sports organizations to increase spectator interest and whether the use of social media as a customer relationship strategy is effective in achieving this goal. Due to the exponential growth in the use and development of technology observed in recent years, there has been increased curiosity about the application of social media to traditional concepts such as brand engagement and customer relationship management (CRM) (Misirlis & Vlachopoulou, 2018; Payne & Frow, 2005). Social media is now being used as a popular form of marketing by nearly all organizations wishing to grow their business or appear to be more attractive to their current target market (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Dwivedi, Kapoor, & Chen, 2015; Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015). Consequently, this study embraces the following research objectives with the aim of examining the technological development of social media as an Internet based platform whilst understanding its effect as a brand engagement strategy on customer interactivity. We focus on the social media platform Facebook and more specifically the Facebook pages of the thirty-two football teams

involved in a major football tournament. The goal is (i) to analyse whether social media-based customer engagement strategy has an impact on increasing spectator interest; and (ii) to understand whether or not a club's online interactivity and spectator interest is determined by its position in a sports tournament. The study builds upon current research by not only justifying the heavy use of social media as an important customer engagement technique but how social media is increasingly used to engage with customers on a more personal level, encouraging greater interactivity and CRM (Liu & Lopez, 2016; Thorbjonsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002). We thus fill the gap in the literature on how social media as an online marketing medium is employed by sports clubs. Our empirical investigation of the relationship between web interactivity and the sports clubs' positions in a league competition's groups and the use of social media as a customer engagement strategy address some of these issues.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews previous research and literature surrounding the subjects of customer engagement, social media and sports organizations. Section 3 outlines the research hypotheses and describes the methodological approach taken by the study, including the method of data collection. Section 4 sets out the results of the data collected and Section 5 discusses the

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implications of the findings relating to previous research and the hypotheses of this research.

2. Literature review

Over the past decade, the marketing environment has been challenged and changed greatly due to the online phenomenon known as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is understood by Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching, (2013) as being associated with user generated content that has a greater interaction between users of the Internet and the web. The Internet is a tool that allows one to communicate with the rest of the world as being a many-to-many communication channel in comparison to the telephone for example, which is a one-to-one communication channel (Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). According to Boone & Kurtz (2007, p. 488), integrated marketing communications or IMC has been defined as: ‘the guiding principle organizations follow to communicate with their target markets. Integrated marketing communications attempts to coordinate and control the various elements of the promotional mix - advertising, personal selling, public relations, publicity, direct marketing, and sales promotion - to produce a unified customer-focused message and, therefore, achieve various organizational objectives.’ Mangold & Faulds (2009, p. 357) understand social media to be an element of the promotional mix; ‘social media is a hybrid element of the promotion mix because in a traditional sense it enables companies to talk to their customers, while in a non-traditional sense it enables customers to talk directly to one another.’

Social media has proven to be a fast growing online tool and is still continuing to grow along with its users (Malthouse et al., 2013; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Karami, Dahl, Turner-McGrievy, Kharrazi, & Shaw, 2018; Kim & Hastak, 2018). It is part of many peoples everyday lives; visiting social media sites and connecting to others from all over the world. Chen, Fay, and Wang, (2011) believe the phenomenon of social media is not to be ignored and is becoming a part of everyday marketing operations in all competitive and successful organizations. They believe the power is with the customer when using social media and they believe this power held by the consumer can create limitations in terms of the amount of control a company has over its information. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have a much more technological viewpoint of social media and define social media as: ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.’ Kaplan and Haenlein believe social media to be user generated content, created by the consumer or end-user and is publicly available to the consumer.

Social media technologies have increased the number of communication channels available to the consumer, generating greater access to product information and consequently empowering the 21st century social consumer (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018). Due to direct, real-time consumer access, however, social media channels also offer greater opportunity for relationship development (Malthouse et al., 2013; Nisar & Prabhakar, 2018; Nisar, Prabhakar, & Strakova, 2018; Payne & Frow, 2005). Brand engagement or social-CRM has, therefore, been developed to harness these new relationship-development opportunities, and reflect the shift in power from organization to customer (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). Social media enables businesses to engage and persuade prospective customers and to construct a trusted relationship at actual time and at a fraction of the costs of traditional media. Mangold & Faulds (2009, p. 357) develop this view, recognizing customer engagement to go beyond company-customer interactions by involving the consumers actively: ‘social media is a hybrid element of the promotion mix because in a traditional sense it enables companies to talk to their customers, while in a non-traditional sense it enables customers to talk directly to one another.’

It is evident that with the ever-growing use of online advertising by marketers combined with an increase in consumer usage of the social media platform, marketers are competitive as ever and must use social

media on a regular basis to stay up-to-date and current with the changing online environment and changing customer knowledge and skills (Kapoor et al., 2018; Pee, 2018). Holzner (2009, p. 1) believes that in order to survive in this new online environment with Internet-savvy customers, organizations must ‘provide content and not just ad copy.’ Marketers, to be successful must contribute content into the social networking world continuously in order to remain current and competitive.

2.1. Social media and customer engagement

In terms of a customer engagement strategy associated with social media, it is believed to seek to ‘engage customers in the online social locations where they naturally spend time’ (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Aswani, Kar, Ilavarasan, & Dwivedi, 2018; Aladwani, 2015). Weinberg, de Ruyter, Dellarocas, Buck, and Keeling, (2013) discuss how social media engagement is understood to be ultimately about building an organization’s online reputation, attracting more people to the website to buy the products or use the services. There are various consumer attitudes toward social media. Attitude, according to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), is ‘a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor.’ Daugherty et al. (2008) find that a customer’s positive attitude toward user-generated online material will generally increase their creation and consumption of that material. Daugherty et al. (2008, p. 33) further explain that; ‘consumers attitudes toward social media should relate positively to their use of the information available on these sites, which in turn could enhance their tendency to join groups and engage in viral messages.’ The increased use of interaction within the social media network will potentially create opportunities for companies and increase sales or specifically increase spectators for the football club.

In recent years, marketing, specifically sports marketing for organizations, has been aided by the concept of social media; in particular the use of social networks such as Twitter (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010; Schonfeld, 2009; Roberts, Roche, Jones, & Munday, 2016; Capriotti & Ruesja, 2018). Facebook is another social networking tool. Facebook has 42 million users who are ‘smart, affluent, Internet – savvy people, who marketers can no longer ignore’ (Holzner, 2009, p.1). More up-to-date statistics gathered by Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries, (2015) and Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet (2015) show Facebook to have more than 1.06 billion users. Holzner (2009) explains how the consumers are in charge, not the marketers. He understands that the marketing channel has now changed; in fact it has reversed completely; a bottom-up approach, with customers having the ability to give their opinions and thoughts. Facebook users, as well as all social network users, generally have the capability to comment on products, services and organizations specifically (Hardley, 2009; Malthouse et al., 2013). There is limited control of this by the organization themselves. Holzner (2009) believes that it is worth listening to what those customers have to say, understanding their needs and wants that need satisfying; they may well influence your future business decisions and determine the success of the business. If customers are satisfied, they are more likely to be loyal to an organization and allow for an increase in profitability of a company. This is supported by Hallowell (1996) who discusses the relationships of customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability. His analysis indicates that if customer satisfaction is improved within an organization then profits will generally increase. It is the same situation in the sporting industry; in relation to increasing spectators in sport, if customer’s wants and needs are satisfied, it is more likely that current fans will continue their support and potential fans will become definite spectators to the sport, becoming loyal fans. Hallowell (1996) examines the relationships of customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability. His findings show that if customer satisfaction is improved within an organization then profits will generally increase. It is the same situation in the sporting industry; in

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