The Role of Social Media in Sports Communication: An Analysis of NBA Teams'
Strategy

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand how social media is being used amongst sports organizations. More specifically, this study analyzes the dynamic of social media in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Existing research has established the importance of social media in sports and entertainment venues but fails to elaborate on how individual teams implement social media strategy, specific tactics, and the current climate around social media in sports communication. To establish best practices of social media in sports communication specific to the NBA, this study interviewed social media specialists from nine NBA teams. Eight best practices were established: give quality content; incorporate social media offline; gamify social media efforts; personalize fans on social media; collect fan data; fansource/crowdsource; use fans to amplify message; and track, measure, analyze and adjust. These best practices explain the most effective ways to utilize social media in sports communication specific to the NBA. These best practices can also be translated across other sports teams, entertainment entities, and brands.

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Introduction

Sports communication provides a vital role in the entertainment industry and takes on many different forms with varying stakeholders. Sports organizations utilize numerous mediums to reach their stakeholders including television, radio, publications, and online efforts. With over 65% of online adults using social networking sites, social media has drastically grown in usage across numerous industries, and has become an especially popular medium in the sports industry (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). Sports organizations are now utilizing an increasing number of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare, Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, blogs, and live chats. Social media are efficient in reaching many stakeholders with speed, carrying ample amounts of information, and with the capability of interaction (Kietsmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). These elements directly apply to uses in sports communication to connect with the public, build a brand, conduct customer relationship management, and manage reputations.

Many sports organizations and leagues are still testing the capabilities of the ever-changing social media landscape (Esposito, 2012). The National Basketball Association (NBA) and its teams have delved into the social media world but have yet to completely understand and master the realm. All teams of the NBA need a communications plan that incorporates social media and encompasses the entirety of its uses.

The purpose of this study is to identify how social media are being utilized by NBA teams. It captures the communication efforts between NBA teams and stakeholders, and the various ways social media can be used to enhance this relationship. The study uses interviews with NBA social media specialists and online observations to evaluate the

current social media efforts in the NBA. In analyzing current social media strengths and struggles of NBA teams, a guide of best practices will be developed.

This study will focus solely on the teams of the National Basketball Association (NBA). The study will emphasize the methods employed by NBA team social media specialists, and the participation of fans and third parties. It will exclusively evaluate official NBA team social media platforms. The study will not analyze social media platforms representing central efforts of the NBA league, fan clubs, or other third parties. This study will also not analyze other basketball leagues or other sports, although the practices can be translated to these other arenas. The scope of the study will remain narrow in observing a sample of the 30 NBA teams and their key social media communications efforts to reach stakeholders in the basketball entertainment industry.

I will begin the study with a review of relevant literature in sports communication, social media, and sports communication integrating social media. Then I will describe the methodology of the study followed by the findings. Finally, I will discuss conclusions that can be drawn from the findings and propose a guide of best practices for NBA teams to utilize social media in their communications efforts.

Literature Review

Sports Communication

Sports communication lies at the heart of the sports industry. Pedersen, Miloch, and Laucella (2011) define sports communication as the "process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavor share symbols as they create meaning through interaction." Sports communication underscores the relationship development between organizations, players, fans, and third parties. Ultimately, these

relationships are vital to the success of each individual team. Sports organizations have

multiple mediums to cultivate these relationships via Internet, television, radio, and print

publications. Over time, each medium has evolved respectively. Currently, there is a

more integrated approach across these mediums in sports communication.

Sports communication is a dynamic practice that encompasses many functions

within the sports industry from branding, reputation management, and customer service

to sales, marketing, and sponsorship. These core efforts relate back to the central task of

"providing [stakeholders] with an emotional connection to understand, interpret, and

identify with sports," specifically on behalf of an individual player, team or league (Rein,

Kotler & Shields, 2006). Further, Rein, Kotler, and Shields (2006) offer five key

objectives in effective sports communication: (1) to engage the [stakeholder's] interest,

(2) to imprint the sports brand's identity for a longer-lasting impression, (3) to humanize

the sports brand, (4) to encourage the [stakeholder] to identify with the sports brand and

feel a personal connection with the participants, and (5) to place the outcomes of

competition in more than just a winning context. These strategic objectives are critical in

relating with stakeholders, sparking interest, continually building the fan base, and

retaining the current fan base. The sports environment is filled with an overwhelming

number of messages and channels. Therefore, it is essential to "differentiate the sports

brand" and "connect with [stakeholders]" (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006). This allows for

a unique, lasting impression on stakeholders to solidify their connection with the brand.

This paper highlights two communication theories that apply in sports

communication. These theories are fundamental because of their implications when

strategically communicating in the sports environment. It is important to recognize the

theoretical elements of communication to effectively engage with stakeholders. The following theories will provide a basis for calculated communications efforts within sports organizations relative to various stakeholders.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratification theory proposes that the public seek information and particular communications sources to fulfill a satisfaction (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). People need to expand their knowledge base and social engagements through specific media outlets (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). The theory addresses how the public utilizes the media to satisfy an internal need (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). The theory is useful because it illustrates that people gravitate to sports media to satisfy needs they have. Sports entities must embrace this theory; recognizing the public is pursuing quality content that satisfies particular needs they have through strategic messaging. Sports communication entities must understand the public's search for information, and frame their messages strategically to stand out amongst other content.

Relationship Management Theory

Relationship Management theory establishes that managing "organizational-public relationships" around similar interests will ultimately lead to a mutually beneficial interaction between involved entities (Ledingham, 2003). The theory is dependent on the benefits of both parties (Ledingham, 2003). Within sports communication, establishing effective relationships between fans, players, teams, leagues, and other entities is essential. In cultivating these relationships, each party will be better positioned to fulfill their objectives (Ledingham, 2003). Additionally, the consistent management of these networks through two-way communication complimented with significant content is

critical. Both parties must continue to provide and seek meaningful information from each other otherwise the relationship will deteriorate and become ineffective.

Uses and gratification theory and relationship management theory are two theories that speak to the mindset that sports communication professionals should embrace when building and managing two-way communication over social media channels. Uses and gratification theory gives a central framework that identifies the public's search for information to satisfy an internal need while relationship management theory establishes maintaining mutually beneficial connections to achieve the goals of both parties. These theories will not be addressed in the remainder of this study but are important in recognizing a theoretical approach when using social media to connect with stakeholders in sports and entertainment.

Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) provide an excellent definition of social media: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)." Furthermore, Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) add that all social media fall into six different categories: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs, content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). This classification assists in understanding the uses of a given social media platform.

In an effort to understand the capabilities of social media, Kietsmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) state that social media are comprised of mobile and web-based technologies that provide interactive platforms for the public to share, create,

discuss, and modify content. In addition, the scholars propose the honeycomb of social media (See Appendix A). The honeycomb of social media includes a framework that defines social media platforms through the level of emphasis on seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups (Keitsmann et. al., 2011). The honeycomb of social media analyzes the experience of a given social media platform in relationship to each functional block and then identifies the implications for a firm in developing its social media strategy using that platform (Keitsmann et. al., 2011). Furthermore, an organization can utilize the honeycomb framework to establish its social media strategy by identifying its core objectives and aligning these objectives with the social media platforms that carry those characteristics.

Understanding the business functions social media can provide to an organization is essential. Li and Bernoff (2011) emphasize that with the integration of social media into existing business tasks, firms can now more efficiently listen, talk, energize, support, and embrace their audiences and their ideas. Traditional means of communications, marketing, and regular business functions such as research, marketing, sales, support, and development can now be accomplished in the social media space.

In addition, Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that effective marketing and communications are navigating away from traditional methods of advertising, and resorting to social media as a trustworthy source. Mangold and Faulds (2009) further add that there is an amplified increase in consumer conversations and a decrease in a company's direct control over its brand's conversation. Therefore, the scholars believe that it is critical for organizations to remain active in monitoring and participating in the social media dialogue (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

They identify nine ways that businesses use social media successfully; (1) provide networking platforms, (2) use blogs and other social media tools to engage customers, (3) use both traditional and Internet-based promotional tools to engage customers, (4) provide information, (5) be outrageous, (6) provide exclusivity, (7) design products with talking points and consumers' desired self-images in mind, (8) support causes that are important to consumers, and (9) utilize the power of stories (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The scholars say that it is important for an organization to define its social media strategy and utilize these tactics to be successful in the social media environment.

The evolution of mobile technology, specifically in regard to increased access to social media and mobile marketing has become crucial to business efforts. Wright, Khanfar, Harrington, and Kizer (2010) theorize that utilizing mobile technology to reach an audience is becoming more efficient than traditional methods of marketing, communication, and advertising (Wright et al., 2010). Wright et al. (2010) find that traditional methods of marketing such as television, radio, and print are capable of reaching a large population but these mediums are too general. Social media efforts, specifically through mobile technology, are becoming more valuable in reaching particular audiences and tailoring the message based on each individual consumer (Wright et al., 2010). The increase in mobile marketing and interactive marketing is expected to continue its growth (Wright et al., 2010).

Moreover, mobile technology provides an excellent medium for brands to constantly stay connected with consumers and develop "intimate relationships." Wright et al. (2010) state that "the use of smartphones, like iPhones and Blackberries, allow consumers to be connected to their favorite social media outlets 24 hours a day." Further,

the academics explain that the key to effectively using these social media tools is not to appear as a marketer to the consumer but to establish a relationship with the consumer and build their trust (Wright et al., 2010). Many organizations are recognizing this trend and have added a Facebook page, Twitter account, and an iPhone application to their social media strategy.

Social Media and Sports Communication

The use of social media by professional sports teams is increasingly rapidly. Many teams are dedicating more time and resources to operate their social media presence and to connect with stakeholders. Additionally, nearly all sports teams' websites now integrate links to their respective pages for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. This makes sense because brands rely heavily on a fan following, so it is essential to understand what media fans want. These digital media outlets provide efficient means for sports organizations to facilitate fan interaction and commentary of their brand due to low entry costs and large fan populations present.

Rothschild (2011) found that there is a significant rise in social media use in the sports and entertainment industry resulting in the decline of traditional marketing and communication methods. He conducted an online survey of sports and entertainment venue managers to understand their perceptions and predictions of social media in sport and entertainment facilities. Rothschild (2011) found that a strategic social media approach is becoming increasingly important in sports and entertainment venues, in addition to the need for more resources to be dedicated to these digital efforts. The results of the survey identified the following characteristics about social media usage in sports and entertainment:

- Sixty-two percent have someone dedicated to managing social media versus 37 percent who are without someone dedicated to managing social media.

- Eight percent classify the venue's use of social media as expert, 47 percent as proficient, 34 percent as still learning, 8 percent as behind the curve, and 2 percent as not using it and do not care to use.

- Fifty-seven percent of venues have a defined social media strategy versus 47 percent who do not have a defined social media strategy

- Fifty-two percent reported venues experienced a revenue increase with a defined social media strategy versus 19 percent that reported revenue increase without a defined social media strategy

The study illustrates the rise in social media while traditional methods are becoming less efficient due to cost, variety of product, and consumer resistance to advertising (Rothschild, 2011). Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube emerged as the most important platforms to monitor the conversation about their venue (Rothschild, 2011). The primary motives for utilizing social media were to increase lead generation (65%), to monitor the conversation about their brand (51%), and in response to their competitors doing it (37%) (See Appendix B) (Rothschild, 2011). Additionally, the research identified the greatest obstacles to executing a social media strategy were not having enough staff to manage it (67%), and not enough data or analytics to develop ROI (30%) (See Appendix C) (Rothschild, 2011). As new media marketing tools will be more prevalent in the next three years, it is vital for sports and entertainment venues to become heavily involved in social media (See Appendix D) (Rothschild, 2011).

Social media have transformed sports media and its consumption. Fans, athletes, and teams now have the ability to easily connect with one another (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Sanderson and Kassing (2011) state that social media provide professional teams and athletes with "more control over the release of sports news in addition to increasing their self-preservation management" (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Sports journalists and other sports media personnel also utilize these mediums to reach audiences, but the public, professional teams and athletes now have the ability to bypass traditional media outlets through social media platforms (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Sanderson and Kassing (2011) assert that blogs and Twitter have revolutionized sports media by giving athletes and teams an active role in content production. Mass media outlets appear to be losing their edge in sports media due to professional athletes' progressive engagement in social media. The integration of social media into sports communication changes the dynamic of how news and information is released. This provides opportunities for professional sports teams and professional athletes to better connect with their stakeholders.

Research Questions

This literature review provides a synopsis of current coverage of social media and its implications in sports communication. The literature also introduces applications of social media in the NBA. However, there are gaps in understanding the use of social media in sports communication. While NBA teams have emerged onto numerous social platforms, there is a lack of a systematic approach on social media strategy specific to the NBA. The literature identifies the need for a complete analysis of the role of social media in professional sports specific to the efforts of individual teams (Rothschild, 2011). Therefore, this study will look to understand the social media strategy of NBA teams.

More specifically, this study will provide an understanding of the ways in which NBA teams utilize social media, the objectives of NBA teams behind social media, and the most effective means for NBA teams to engage in social media in developing best practices. This study will address the following research questions:

[RQ1]: What social media platforms are being used by NBA teams?

[RQ2]: What key objectives do NBA teams wish to accomplish via social media?

[RQ3]: What levels of staffing are dedicated to social media efforts?

[RQ4]: What tactics are most essential in accomplishing the key objectives of NBA teams via social media?

[RQ5]: How are NBA teams measuring their social media efforts?

Methodology

This study was conducted through in-depth telephone interviews. Each interview utilized the same set of questions and generally approached each question in the same order. At times, questions were skipped over or asked later if the interviewee had sufficiently answered that question already or to simply maintain continuity in the conversation. All interviews were conducted over an eight-week period from February 8, 2012 to March 28, 2012. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Detailed notes were written during each interview. The data gathered was analyzed for consistent similarities and differences across the interviews. Data was also gathered by reviewing individual NBA teams' online social media efforts. Furthermore, the data were analyzed for apparent gaps in social media usage. Nine social media managers or related specialists of NBA teams were interviewed for this study. Each interviewee oversees, manages, or analyzes the social media efforts of an individual NBA team. In addition, all interviewees

are aware of the ongoing social media initiatives set forth by their respective team and contribute in the social media communication. Finally, all relevant data from the interviews, literature, and observations were drawn upon and synthesized into the findings and discussion, and best practices.

Subjects Interviewed

Mike Donnay, Senior Director of Brand Networks, Detroit Pistons

Greg Esposito, Social Media Specialist, Phoenix Suns

Jared Harding, Manager of Interactive Media & Digital Strategy, Denver Nuggets

Mike Hutchinson, Director of New Media, Washington Wizards

Nick Monroe, Senior Sale & Retention Executive/ Social Media Manager, Milwaukee Bucks

Andrew Nicholson, Manager of New Media, Sacramento Kings

Jerry Rizzo, Social Media Coordinator, Philadelphia 76ers

Chad Shanks, E-Marketing Coordinator, Houston Rockets

Peter Stringer, Director of Interactive Media, Boston Celtics

Findings/ Discussion

Utilizing social media to assist the efforts of individual NBA teams is still relatively new. Many teams are in the beginning to middle stages of identifying the capabilities of social media as it relates to the NBA and are experimenting with the evolving technology to more efficiently reach their stakeholders. There is a great opportunity for NBA teams to strengthen and expand their social media presence, which will create a better overall fan experience (Smith, 2012). These findings and discussion will address the following elements of NBA teams' digital media efforts: social media

strategy, social media platforms, content, social media campaigns, offline presence, in-arena presence, connecting with fans outside the arena, tracking measurement and ROI, and NBA social media issues.

Social Media Strategy

Many NBA teams have identified their own strategy and objectives in utilizing social media. Most organizations use social media primarily as a branding and marketing tool to easily reach their fans. The growing digital space has become valuable in developing a community for fans, and promoting online and offline fan engagement. Additionally, NBA teams are looking to utilize social media as a customer relationship management tool. NBA organizations have found that digital platforms can efficiently provide customer service and handle questions, concerns, problems, and related issues. Finally, NBA teams are attempting to monetize their daily functions via social media. Ultimately, every organization strives to drive stakeholders to its website to increase ticket sales, merchandise sales, and sponsorship deals. The ability for social media to directly connect with audiences provides the opportunity for NBA organizations to directly impact the bottom line.

Another important component of NBA team's social media strategy is the magnitude of a given team's brand and their level of success. NBA teams with major brand recognition and elite players garner a greater digital following. Therefore, these teams can focus less on encouraging fans to engage with their social media channels but rather provide tools and initiatives to creatively influence the online conversation, and further concentrate on the monetization of their efforts. Additionally, NBA teams with recent winning success are likely to receive positive engagement in higher frequency.

When a given NBA team is losing, the organization does not want it's presence on social media channels to be a losing brand. Therefore, teams must adjust the online messaging and conversation accordingly based on the success of the team. These aspects are critical to keep in mind as NBA teams implement social media strategy.

Social Media Platforms

Many NBA teams have expanded their social media strategy across numerous platforms. These platforms vary across teams but include Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Foursquare, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Flickr, LinkedIn, Tout, blogs, and chats, along with their own personal social hubs. The Phoenix Suns have developed their own social Fan Hub at fans.suns.com that incorporates all their social media interaction into one digital location. Most NBA teams have found great success with Twitter and Facebook. NBA teams have seen substantial growth in Twitter. From January 2010 to March 2012, the Boston Celtics have gained over 400,000 Twitter followers (Sherk, 2011). In this time period, the Phoenix Suns and Denver Nuggets have also seen Twitter follower increases of about 85,000 and 70,000, respectively (Sherk, 2011). Twitter gives audiences a two-way conversational tool that offers up to the minute updates and can generate fan interaction. Many NBA teams noted that Twitter and Facebook are very different for their uses. NBA teams see Facebook as a brand extension of their website that requires a more calculated approach with less frequent updates. The teams identify that the platform is utilized best when primarily incorporating interactive information, links to the website, and applications.

Additionally, Foursquare and YouTube are common platforms for NBA social media efforts. Nearly all teams use Foursquare on every home game night as another

means of engaging with fans. Foursquare utilizes location-based technology allowing fans to digitally "check-in" to the arena to maximize interaction. The Milwaukee Bucks encourage fans to "check-in" on Foursquare during home and away games. Within the Foursquare application, the Milwaukee Bucks provide exclusive content consisting of pictures, player information, and discounts for fans to connect with the team. Furthermore, NBA teams recognize that YouTube gives fans interactive visual content outside of photos that can promote fan engagement. NBA organizations found that YouTube is utilized best when capturing exclusive content and is integrated into Facebook and Twitter.

NBA teams have seen less success with Tumblr, Flickr, and Google+. Tumblr and Flickr are great in providing visual content, however the platforms lack fan engagement and interaction. Ultimately, NBA teams want to connect and converse with their audiences over social media but these platforms are not effective. Furthermore, Google+ is a growing social networking site with great potential but the masses have yet to adopt and consistently utilize the platform. There are many unique capabilities that Google+ offers but until a larger population of the target audience has migrated to the platform, NBA teams should be cautious in the amount of resources dedicated to Google+. New social media platforms are constantly being developed. NBA teams must be selective in which platforms they utilize to ensure a high level of dedication and responsiveness with stakeholders interests in mind.

Content

Most NBA teams stress that the most important aspect of a social media presence is the content; there must be *quality content*. For this study, we can define *quality content*

in the social media realm to be authentic, exclusive information in varying forms,

whether it be text, pictures, video, or anything else, that is posted with appropriate length

and frequency, and gives value to stakeholders. Social media is cluttered with content.

Therefore *quality content* allows for a given team's message to stand out from all other

visible content on social media feeds. It is vital that NBA team's social media platforms

provide value to their audience. Q*uality content* that is exclusive in nature is necessary.

This exclusive content includes information that highlights the proximity to the team,

behind the scenes information, and player contact; information that they cannot get

elsewhere. NBA teams have found success in providing *quality content* by integrating

their social media tools. For example, many teams are utilizing the social media

platforms YouTube and Instagram to post videos and pictures, respectively, through their

Twitter and Facebook accounts. This integration of tools provides varying content to fans

which further increases engagement and interaction.

Social Media Campaigns

Many teams have found success in developing social media campaigns around

specific thematic content. Posts typically do not have a long life span; therefore

connecting each post to an overarching campaign can strengthen its effectiveness and

better promote the NBA team's brand. Twitter is especially useful in developing hashtag

campaigns around a season-long hashtag or using game-night hashtags. The Sacramento

Kings have found success in building their brand for the 2011-2012 season around the

#KingsAllDay season-long hashtag. The season-long hashtag allows for fans and

stakeholders to easily search for one uniform hashtag. Meanwhile, the Washington

Wizards utilize numerous similar game-night hashtags based on their opponent to build

their brand such as #WizNets or #WizGrizzlies. The game-night hashtag allows for fans and stakeholders to develop an exclusive emotion around each individual game.

The Philadelphia 76ers employed an effective social media campaign that partnered with the team's "Go Red Night" on February 11, 2012. The theme game night promoted the education of women's heart health, and was sponsored by Main Line Health endorsing the American Heart Association's "Go Red For Women" campaign. The Philadelphia 76ers incorporated Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare, and Instagram to push the night's message, incorporate fan interaction, and more importantly, promote the Philadelphia 76ers. The game night campaign utilized live tweeting and posting which incorporated the hashtags #GoRed and #Sixers, as well numerous pictures and video. Additionally, the campaign encouraged fans to wear all red while the team wore their away red jerseys and staff wore red ties and pins. The team also used social media efforts to inform fans of concourse activities with representatives from Main Line Health and American Heart Association, in addition to the 25% discount on red fan merchandise items. Ultimately, this social media campaign was effective in encouraging fans to continue the conversation about the Philadelphia 76ers online while incorporating offline interaction, sponsors, and live fan engagement.

Offline Presence

Embracing these social media campaigns online is vital but many teams emphasize that it is equally important to incorporate social media and related campaigns in offline efforts as well. The Washington Wizards gamenight hashtags are also included on tickets, posters, other print, and television channels airing games. Furthermore, the Milwaukee Bucks embrace their season-long hashtag #BeMilwaukee and utilize

numerous variations that apply throughout the season (e.g. #BeVictorious, #BeQuick, or #BeSmooth). The Milwaukee Bucks integrate the hashtag on a multi-channel approach both online and offline. The hashtag can be found across numerous social media platforms, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram but can also be found on offline mediums such as market ads, billboards, and other print. Many teams find that social media is simply an online way for the brand to engage its stakeholders. Social media is an opportunity to continue the conversation about your brand, therefore wherever your brand is, both online and offline, its social media channels should be present, especially the Facebook URL and Twitter handle.

The Houston Rockets took their social media offline presence even further on their Social Media Night on February 17, 2012. The organization sold exclusive tickets to Twitter followers of players Courtney Lee, Chase Budinger, and Patrick Patterson. These ticket holders attended the home game against the Minnesota Timberwolves and then had VIP access to a small after party to mingle with the three Houston Rockets players. Social media gives the public the opportunity to directly connect with teams and players, but this social media initiative maximizes this connection through intimate contact with the team.

In-Arena Presence

Social media presence inside NBA arenas is a critical element to each NBA team's social media strategy. The team's brand is everywhere inside NBA arenas from the players, employees, the Jumbotron, and all signage. Nearly all teams recognize the importance of integrating their social media efforts into the live fan experience in the arena. The Detroit Pistons are in the process of installing two large "Twitter Boards" in

the arena that will be solely dedicated to displaying the most recent social media updates about the team during games. Nearly all teams utilize Twitter and Facebook to live tweet and live post. NBA teams are consistently monitoring these feeds during games to interact with fans. Some of these interactions include simply re-tweeting or liking fan's comments to creatively integrating fan interaction offline with the arena. The Phoenix Suns provide the opportunity to Facebook post and tweet questions for the team's assistant coach to answer at halftime. The Denver Nuggets provide an opportunity during games via Twitter to search for the mascot throughout the arena and tell him the key phrase provided over Twitter to receive a free autographed basketball. These small initiatives encourage fans to really engage with the brand and feel as though they are connected with the team.

Many teams emphasize that providing free items and rewards over social media during games is especially effective in generating fan engagement. These incentives over social media may range from free shirts and hats to giving certain fans the opportunity to change to a closer seat. The Boston Celtics offer an incentive during games via Twitter for fans to win a free upgrade to a courtside seat. Additionally, Foursquare is an important element of the in-arena presence. The platform encourages fans to engage within the arena and allows the team to provide information about the venue and event. Visibility of the team's social media efforts is essential inside the arena. This creates a greater fan experience, and allows fans to engage in online and offline settings.

Connecting with Fans Outside the Arena

Social media enables fans to interact with NBA organizations when not in attendance of games. Twitter and Facebook are very popular, in addition to live chats and

live video streaming. When fans are watching a NBA game on television, NBA teams

want them posting and tweeting about the game to broadly promote the brand and reach

fan's individual networks. Additionally, nearly all NBA teams have a live chat platform

that provides as a conversational tool for fans during games. The live chat tool is

effective in gathering fans in a common digital location, informing them of frequent

game updates, and generating discussion around the team.

Furthermore, the growth of "second screen" applications and "social TV" gives

fans the opportunity to engage more interactively with NBA teams over mobile devices

while watching television. The NBA has developed a second screen app, "NBA Game

Time," but individual teams have not begun integrating the technology into their social

media strategy (NBA Game Time, 2012). Ultimately, every NBA team should operate

each platform recognizing fans may not be in attendance of a game in order to further

encourage them to engage with the team as a casual fan, a brand ambassador, or ticket

and merchandise consumer.

Tracking, Measurement, & ROI

With numerous social media initiatives in place, many NBA teams are still

struggling to put a dollar value on the return on investment (ROI) for these efforts.

However, there are many online tools to track and measure social media. The most

common of these tools that teams are utilizing include Facebook Insights, Twitter

Dashboard Analytics via Tweetdeck or Hootsuite, Bit.ly link tracking, Foursquare

Analytics, and some have developed their own internal document. Many teams are

expressing interest in partnering with Radian6, a social media monitoring business

dedicated to assisting brands in measuring, analyzing, and reporting their social media to

better engage with their fans. These tools are providing NBA teams with insights on fan engagement and interaction over their social media channels. Also, teams are able to measure links that lead to ticket sales or merchandise sales. NBA teams can identify more specific components of their efforts such as best times of day to post, trending topics, influential fans, and popular content. Most importantly, NBA teams can analyze all of the incoming data and then adjust their social media tactics accordingly. Most teams embrace a number of these tools but are still working to get their social media strategy down to a science so that they can develop consistent numbers for most efficient fan engagement and return on investment.

NBA Social Media Issues

Many teams understand that there are still limitations to the overall effectiveness of social media in the NBA. Social media is relatively new and continually evolving. It is evident that there has been difficulty monitoring the existing platforms and keeping up with new platforms. Effectively maintaining a social media presence across multiple channels is a major overtaking and requires a great deal of resources at this level. Minimal staffing dedicated to social media is one example of limited resources that has affected efforts of most teams. Most teams have between two and six employees dedicated to social media. Many of these professionals are also responsible for other key tasks within the organization such as public relations, marketing, and website management/editing. The Denver Nuggets have reached out to Movement Strategy, a social media agency, to assist and capitalize on their social media efforts.

The infrastructure of NBA arenas is another major issue in the ongoing social media initiatives. Very few arenas can support mass 3G-cell reception and wi-fi

capabilities. The large number of fans in attendance using the 3G-cell network creates

extremely slow browsing speeds and flow of information over social media channels.

Currently, enabling a more efficient infrastructure is very complicated and costly, and

many teams feel it is simply not feasible to improve at this time. The rise in access to

mobile data underscores the importance for arenas to address these infrastructure

problems. The Detroit Pistons are in the process of installing an advanced wi-fi system to

solve this issue for the 2012-2013 season. These are very important limitations that must

be addressed to facilitate more effective social media initiatives in the NBA.

Best Practices

Based on the interviews with social media specialists of NBA teams, reviewing

relevant literature, and analyzing NBA team's online social media efforts, the following

best practices were established. The best practices were drawn from the similarities in

social media usage by NBA teams. Additionally, the best practices recognize the

common drawbacks of current social media use in the NBA. These practices should be

used to establish a social media plan for NBA teams in their year-round strategy and

tactics.

- Give quality content: The content an NBA team provides over social media
  should give fans value and make following the team worthwhile. The content
  could include text, pictures, video, links, news articles, incentives, trivia, polls,
  free giveaways, tickets, merchandise, team website, and access to other social
  media channels. The content should also be exclusive. The information and
  visuals provided over these channels should be unique such as behind the
  scenes footage or highlights of close proximity to the team. Additionally,

within the content, there must be a call to action. Simply posting news or links will not be effective but creating a reaction will lead to likes, comments, re-tweets, tweets, and discussion about the brand.

- Incorporate social media offline: The goal of an NBA team from a marketing perspective is to have your fans consistently talking about your brand. Therefore, wherever your brand is your social media channels should be present as a means to continue the conversation online. These placements include tickets, posters, billboards, television channels airing games, the Jumbotron, and all in-arena signage. Social media channels and the organization's website should also promote each other. Every event or promotion should highlight the team's social media channels, specifically the Facebook URL and Twitter handle. This is critical in reaching new fans and expanding the brand's following. The future may see these aspects further explored potentially with the integration of social media on player jerseys and on the basketball court, among other specific placements. The NBA Store online has begun selling shirts that feature the leagues top players that include their Twitter handles and team hashtags (NBA Store, 2012).

- Gamify social media efforts: NBA teams can incorporate competitive gaming applications that spark fan interest. The games may or may not relate to the teams' on the court efforts but are effective in generating engagement and directing traffic to NBA team's social media platforms and website. The Boston Celtics have developed the 3-Point Play Facebook application that allows fans to predict the scoring outcomes of three players in competitive

spirit. After each game, the winning fan receives free tickets to an upcoming home game. This "gamification" ties fans closer to the team, creates more impressions, and allows NBA teams to gather information on fans. Furthermore, sports fans are more likely to be gamers, which gives more incentive for a "gamification" approach to engage fans (Consumer Electronic Association, 2008).

- Personalize fans on social media: Be authentic and use personality. Show that the relationships with the audiences via social media are genuine. Provide customer service through answering questions, responding to problems, handling tickets and merchandise concerns, and related issues. At times, communicate accordingly by utilizing abbreviation, appropriate slang, and punctuation. Additionally, NBA teams should maintain a consistent plan of communication over social media channels and avoid gaps as it applies to game days, non-game days, in-season, and off-season.

- Collect fan data: NBA teams can use social media platforms, applications, and related contests to gather fan information and fan input. It is essential to track which fans interact with individual NBA team's social media and provide applications where fans can sign up or input data such as email, phone numbers, and zip codes. From these efforts, NBA teams can build a database of fan information, and directly contact fans inside and outside of social media to market tickets, merchandise, and related deals. The ability to identify who and where fans are allows NBA teams to better market to their key audiences. The previously mentioned Boston Celtics 3-Point Play Facebook application

has allowed their social media staff to add over 85,000 people into their fan
database and sell over $200,000 worth of tickets.

- Fansource/Crowdsource: Give fans the opportunity for their input to be heard
  and to make relatively important decisions for the organization. NBA teams
  can develop campaigns around allowing the fans to decide on a component of
  their organization. The Philadelphia 76ers allowed their fans to vote on the
  final three designs on the team's new mascot in which the winning design was
  used for the 2011-2012 season. Furthermore, the 2012 NBA All-Star Sprite
  Slam Dunk Contest gave fans the judging role through Twitter, SMS and
  website voting (Laird, 2012). These social media initiatives give fans a voice
  within the decision making process, and closely connects them with teams and
  players.

- Use fans to amplify the NBA team's message: NBA teams can increase the
  impressions of their messages, and their following by utilizing fans and their
  networks. Providing quality content will lead to re-tweets, likes, and sharing,
  but teams can go even further with the fan relationship by asking fans to
  amplify the message through incentives. Teams can ask fans to re-tweet and
  then the team will follow them on Twitter. The Denver Nuggets held the
  Nuggets Big Give campaign where they would donate five dollars for every
  share of their information on Facebook. These small initiatives can yield
  major results in increasing the fan base, brand impressions, fan interaction,
  and social media awareness around a given team. Furthermore, the Phoenix
  Suns have developed the "Planet Orange Ambassadors" initiative where they

mobilize eleven volunteers that are social media activists on behalf of the

organization and promote the team via Facebook, Twitter, message boards,

live chats, and other channels. In this initiative, fans enjoy promoting the team

and having the Phoenix Suns social media ambassador title. In return, they

receive tickets to a game and merchandise which proves to be a great

investment in generating impressions and assisting staffing efforts.

- Track, measure, analyze, and adjust: Utilize social media tracking analytics to

  measure and analyze the NBA team's ongoing initiatives. Facebook Insights

  and Twitter Dashboard Analytics via Hootsuite and Tweetdeck are especially

  effective in providing quality data, visuals, and reports. Additionally, the

  Twitter Dashboard Analytics can provide link tracking as well as Bit.ly

  Analytics. All of this data can provide measurable insights to social efficiency

  and return on investment of an NBA team. This data can provide foresight to

  potential times of day to post, type of content to post, and most influential fans.

  Once the data has been measured and analyzed, it is essential for NBA teams

  to adjust their social media tactics to provide a more engaging fan experience

  via social media.

These best practices establish not only how to use social media in sports

communication but why these practices are important. These best practices include

guiding examples in which teams have utilized these methods. It is essential for sports

entities to understand the most effective ways they can utilize social media tools, and

why those tools work for them. Each of these practices should be integrated into an

overarching social media communications strategy. A visual graphic has also been

developed to illustrate these best practices (See Appendix G).

Future of Social Media in the NBA

The evolution of business within the NBA will seek to more heavily adapt and

rely on social media. NBA teams depend on a fan following and engagement. Social

media provide a quick and cost efficient medium to communicate with these key

stakeholders. The NBA appears to be leading the way among United States professional

sports leagues but still has not embraced the entirety of social media capabilities.

Currently, there are limited resources available for NBA teams to incorporate a

fully developed social media strategy. NBA teams must look to allocate larger budgets

dedicated to social media. More specifically, investments in staffing and infrastructure

hold the highest importance. In providing more staff to manage and expand upon ongoing

digital initiatives, NBA teams' social media efforts will connect with a larger fan base,

and have a more dramatic impact on an NBA organization's ROI.

Additionally, the growing dependence of mobile devices, and necessity of Internet

access within NBA arenas will push teams to invest in a compatible cellular and wi-fi

infrastructure. NBA organizations require faster Internet capabilities within the arena to

conduct this two-way communication with stakeholders both inside and outside the arena.

Furthermore, this improved infrastructure will serve the Internet needs of many NBA

team departments across the organization outside of the communications efforts.

In addition, NBA teams must expand upon their social media monetization. These

efforts lie in the adaptation of applications and initiatives that extract consumer data. As

sports organizations continue to transfer their social media audiences' information into

direct marketing and sales, this will translate into increases in ROI. NBA teams should provide more opportunities to collect fan data within their social media strategy. Further, NBA teams must better structure their methods in collecting this data and better transition these audiences into ticket and merchandise consumers. As consumers become more trusting of social media, increased social commerce should take place over social media platforms. These monetization efforts are critical, however NBA teams must be cautious of sacrificing the authenticity of their content and privacy issues, keeping the long-term relationship with stakeholders as a primary objective.

Finally, NBA teams should effectively encourage the public to engage in social actions. Social actions consist of following the team on social media platforms, or promoting the team through social media channels. In utilizing the best practices and new evolving marketing technologies, NBA teams can better encourage social actions with their brand. These social actions are crucial in building the fan base, utilizing fans social networks to endorse the team, and increasing opportunities for monetization. Whether it is simply better advertising their social media channels, creating events for social media enthusiasts or utilizing new technologies that creatively encourage engagement, NBA teams must better encourage the public to become socially engaged with their brand. One rising innovation in social media marketing is Grandstand, a new web platform designed by iStrategyLabs that integrates social media platforms into offline games, rewards and visualizations (Grandstand, 2012). This platform has the ability to enhance the in-person experience in sports and entertainment venues, and encourage social action. The social media tools available combined with creative campaigns and potentially new technology provides the opportunity to better engage and interact with stakeholders.

Conclusion

NBA teams have emerged into the social media landscape and have begun implementing specific tactics as part of their social media strategy. However, there are elements that teams have yet to implement into an overarching social media plan. Based on relevant literature and interviews with NBA social media specialists, this study established best practices for the use of social media in sports communication. These best practices identify ways in which sports teams can maximize the success of their social media use within the sports industry. In addition, they identify areas in which sports teams can improve their social media within their marketing efforts. These findings are important to improve the use of social media in sports communication and better engage with primary stakeholders and fans.

Future research should analyze the central NBA league social media efforts and identify how to better connect the league's efforts with individual teams. Furthermore, additional research should study differences in social media efforts across leagues and sports. The implications of mobile access to the Internet and future integration into sports and entertainment venues could be studied more in-depth. Additionally, as NBA teams and other American sports teams are emerging into global markets, further research should study cultural differences as they relate to sports communication. Finally, social media are continually changing and evolving. Future research should account for updates and new technologies as they arise.

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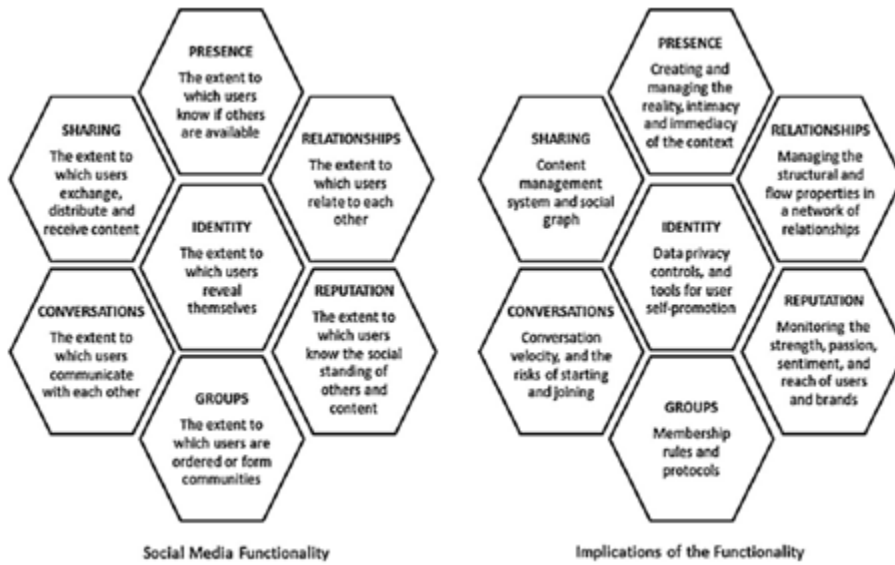Smith, H. (2012, February 1). Personal Communication.

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Appendix A: The Honeycomb of Social Media

Social Media Functionality   Implications of the Functionality

Appendix B: Primary reasons for social media strategy (Rothschild, 2011)

Reason	%
To increase lead generation	65
Monitor conversation about our brand	51
My competitors are doing it	37
Directive from management	14
I do not know why we have one	1
Other	24
Total	100[a]

Note: [a]More than one reason was allowed, therefore percentages add up to more than 100

Appendix C: Greatest impediment to implementing a social media strategy (Rothschild, 2011)

Reason	%
We do not have enough staff to manage it	67
Not enough data or analytics to develop ROI	30
Getting buy-in from senior management	15
I do not think our audience is active on social media	11
Social is not a part of our strategic roadmap	6
We cannot develop a compelling business case	3
Total	100[a]

Note: [a]More than one reason was allowed, therefore percentages add up to more than 100

Appendix D: Which marketing tools will be used more over the next three years (Rothschild, 2011)

Tools	Use more (%)	Significance
New media (social media, web, e-mail, and mobile)	97	Overwhelmingly significant over all other tools; $p < 0.01$
PR	57	Significant over all other tools (except new media); $p < 0.01$
TV	12	Significant over print ads; $p = 0.02$
Radio	9	
Direct mail	6	
Print ads	5	
Other	10	

Note: Top 2 box = use significantly more + use more

Appendix E: Non-traditional marketing tools being used by venues (Rothschild, 2011)

Marketing tool	Percent use
Social networking sites (Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, etc.)	90
E-newsletter or e-zines	75
Video blogs (YouTube, etc.)	42
Blogs	38
Photo blogs	34
Podcasting	12

Note: Top 2 box = in use significantly + in use some

Appendix F: Importance of technologies used for social media rated on five-point Likert scale where 5 – "very important" (Rothschild, 2011)

Technology/social media	Rating
E-mail	4.6
Facebook	4.3
Twitter	3.8
YouTube	3.5
Blogs	3.0
Flickr	2.7
MySpace	2.4
Foursquare	2.3
Digg.com	2.0
Other	2.6

Appendix G: Best Practices: Social Media in Sports Communication Visual

Best Practices: Social Media in Sports Communication
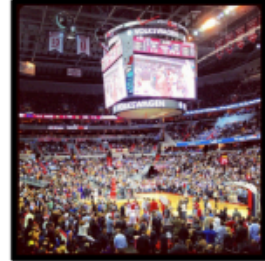
Give Quality Content:
Vary Content Type & Highlight Exclusivity
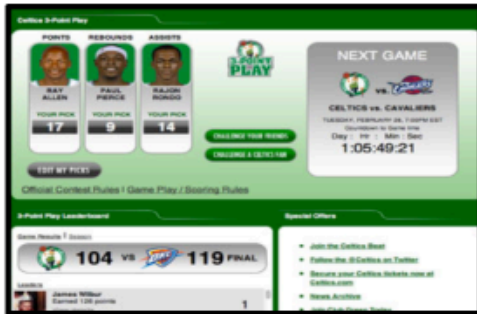
"Content is King and the Kings are Content"

Incorporate Social Media Offline:
Include on Print, Signage, & Other Offline Areas

Gamification:
Boston Celtics 3-pt Play App

Personalize Fans On Social Media:
Respond, Give Customer Service, & Be Authentic

@Reply

Collect Fan Data:
Gather Fan Data & Market Directly

ZIP CODE

Fansource/Crowdsource:
Philadelphia 76ers Mascot Vote

Use Fans To Amplify Message:
Phoenix Suns "Orange Planet Ambassadors"

Track, Measure, Analyze, & Adjust:
Use Analytics to Track & Adjust Accordingly