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Changing the Game: The Effects of Social Media on the Business of Sport

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Changing the Game: The Effects of Social Media on the Business of Sport

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Table of Contents

Introduction

On February 28, 2017, Arizona Coyotes center Alexander Burmistrov was on the receiving end of a brutal (but clean) hit delivered by Boston Bruins defenseman Colin Miller. As a precaution, Burmistrov was stretchered off the ice and taken to a local Boston hospital for further evaluation. Bruins and Coyotes fans alike were concerned for his well-being, but did not have to wait long for answers. Almost precisely an hour after being removed from the ice by medical personnel, Burmistrov posted an Instagram story from his hospital bed. In a hospital gown with wires hooked to his chest, a reassuring Burmistrov captioned his image, "I'm good" with the flexed bicep and the A-OK hand emojis. About an hour and 45 minutes later, the Coyotes released an official statement via Twitter that Burmistrov was okay and released from the hospital – but the fans that follow Burmistrov on Instagram already knew that. This is one of many examples that illustrate how social media has revolutionized the immediacy with which we consume information.

Data complied from a survey conducted in March of 2016 found around 70 percent of Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and entertain themselves (Pew Research Center, 2017). This high percentage demonstrates just how significantly media and technology have transformed the way we communicate and consume information. Because social media is utilized by so many, organizations have altered their marketing strategies to take full advantage of the power of social media. In other words, social media has greatly affected the way organizations communicate and market to their audiences.

Social media has immense marketing power in the sport industry and has completely transformed the viewer experience. This thesis will examine the way in which social media has

revolutionized three major components of fan engagement. First, it illustrates how social media dramatically increases the immediacy by which fans receive sport news and information. Before the widespread use of social media, fans who missed a game would have to wait for the nightly sports broadcast on television, or the headline in the "Sports" section of the paper the next day in order to see the score. Now, social media platforms like Twitter have given fans to access to an unlimited wealth of information, scores, and in-game highlights – as the game unfolds. For example, many sport organizations and sport fans engage in the practice of "live-tweeting," which can be defined as posting on Twitter for a continuous period of time with a sequence of focused Tweets documenting a live event. In a similar manner, Burmistrov was able to notify his fans of his status as he was being evaluated at the hospital. This strategy, among others, has redefined the way fans consume sport.

Second, the thesis demonstrates the importance of social media to enable fans to develop intimate relationships with their favorite teams and players. Sport organizations and athletes frequently use social media as a tool to directly communicate with fans, which gives them the unique ability to form deep connections with fans – connections that may have only been previously attained by meeting a player in person. Athletes are able to use social media as a platform to share more personal aspects of their lives, such as personal opinions or family life. This gives fans insight into their lives off the playing field that they would not ordinarily get to see, affectively giving athletes deeper dimensions of a real human being with feelings and a unique personality. It enables fans to see that there is more to their favorite player than just being extraordinarily gifted at shooting a puck or making a basket. This makes it effortless for fans to form personal connections with players, which, most importantly, results in stronger fan-bases and team loyalty.

Third, this thesis illustrates how social media sites considerably increase the accessibility of sporting events to fans. The most popular social media accounts – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat – are all free of charge, which means users simply have to create an account in order to have access to their services. With access to a computer or smartphone, any sport fan can easily become a social media user, giving them access to a digital world of information, in-game highlights, statistics, scores and direct connections to athletes. It is also important to recognize that spectators no longer have to be sitting in front of a TV or have tickets to a game in order to follow along. Instead, viewers can have access to live/instant updates during games from their smartphones or computers from almost any location, bringing them closer to the action regardless of proximity to the court, field, or rink.

Because of the aforementioned ways that social media has transformed the viewer experience, social media carries immense marketing power in the sport industry, which means advances in technology and social media have important implications for sport marketers. It is imperative for sport managers to understand how social media is affecting the sport industry and what opportunities exist to reach to fans. Social media has provided sport marketers with unique ways to leverage their brand that were never possible before such modern day technologies, and they must take advantage of these opportunities. Because social media has completely altered the way we communicate, this thesis will examine how important it is for sport organizations to adopt social media marketing strategies in order to stay relevant in the sport world and to continue to expand and strengthen their fan base.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

The phenomenon of social media has revolutionized modern society; media and technology have transformed the way we communicate and consume information. Data from a

survey conducted in March of 2016 suggests around 70 percent of Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information, and entertain themselves (Pew Research Center, 2017). Given this high percentage, it is easy to understand just how widespread and significant the impact of social media is.

Although this revolutionary form of communication is relatively new and continuously evolving, many recent studies have been conducted to illustrate the impact of social media on major aspects of communication such as social interaction, journalism, and marketing. For example, social media has altered the way in which we socialize and interact with others. It has completely altered the dynamics of human relationships by providing us with ways to share personal information with essentially no face-to-face interaction. In the field of news and journalism, social media has made it possible for ordinary people to engage in breaking news and information sharing, a communicative process that used to be reserved for major news broadcasters and journalists. The collection, dissemination, and analysis of news and information by the general public are entirely new concepts that have been collectively described as "citizen journalism." Lastly, social media has become an integral component of marketing strategy because of its effectiveness and ability to reach large amounts of consumers – so integral, that studies have suggested that it be considered an element of the promotional mix. This literature review will examine the studies that have been conducted to illustrate the significant impacts of social media on social interaction, journalism, and marketing.

Social Interaction

Humans are innately social creatures; we continuously seek intimate participation and companionship with others. Traditionally, "interaction" implies face-to-face, verbal communication between individuals. However, social media is changing how we communicate

with one another. In fact, Wagner (2015) suggests it is affecting interpersonal communication across all levels of society. Her research suggests that people today generally prefer "mediated communication" rather than personal interaction. For example, rather than picking up the phone or discussing over coffee, people today prefer to engage in conversation via social media through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. Studies have shown that people are actually becoming more social and interactive with one another: it is simply the style of communication that is changing (Wagner, 2015).

Another trend in the scholarship has examined the negative effects of social media on our communication skills. Critics claim that social media has, ironically, made us less social beings by presenting alternative ways to get in touch with one another that do not require face-to-face interaction. For example, a study conducted by Yazino and Opinium found that the increasing number of media platforms for communication have enabled people to use up to 11 different methods to engage with families and friends every day. The same study revealed that more than a quarter of adults spend more time communicating with friends online than in person (RealWire, 2010). Even when we are communicating in person, scholars have investigated the tendency of social media to distract us from the unfolding conversation we are engaged in. Keller (2013) argues that social media can burden face-to-face relationships. She found that face-to-face relationships lose much of their richness, depth, and complexity if people are checking their smartphones rather than interacting with friends and family who are present; the people on the other end of the digital messages are immediately perceived as more important than those with whom were are sharing time and physically interacting with (Keller, 2013).

Recent studies are also examining the profound and unprecedented effects of social media on younger generations. Because social media sites offer multiple daily unique

opportunities for connecting with friends, family, classmates, and people with shared interests, research done in 2010 by O'Keeffe et al. suggests that routine engagement in various forms of social media has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and technical skills. Social media participation can also offer adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world, including: opportunities for community engagement, enhancement of individual and collective creativity, growth of ideas from the crafting of posts, increase in tolerance and respect through expansion of online connections from diverse backgrounds, and fostering individual identity and unique social skills (O'Keeffe et al., 2010).

Despite the aforementioned benefits of social media use in children and adolescents, scholars like Wagner have expressed specific concern for the current younger generations, whose only experience has been in a world of mediated communication. They are most at risk for failing to learn vital conversation skills because access to social media deters them from practicing various forms of verbal communication (Wagner, 2015).

Journalism

Given the development of influential social networks, individuals can produce, cooperate, and share their own media. Scholars like Glaser (2006) have examined what is meant by the concept of *citizen journalism*, and explained how journalism today takes many forms.

Scholars describe the concept of citizen journalism as people without professional journalism training who can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment, or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others (Glaser, 2006). Now, mainstream media reporters and producers are not the exclusive center of knowledge on a subject – Glaser (2006) argues that the audience collectively knows more than

the reporter alone. In fact, studies suggest that large media outlets are trying to harness the

knowledge of their audience through comments at the end of stories they share online or by

creating citizen journalist databases of contributors or sources for stories (Glaser, 2006).

Even if it does not go beyond simple observation at the scene of an important event,

scholars consider nearly all forms of sharing information an act of journalism, including

snapping a newsworthy photo of a significant event and sharing it on social media. With the

presence of a variety of tools for capturing and sharing live events, research suggests the average

citizen can now make news and distribute it globally, an act that was once reserved for

established journalists and media companies (Glaser, 2006).

The term "citizen journalism" has not been embraced with open arms – in fact, Glaser's

study suggests that it has been met with harsh criticism, especially from professional journalists

who believe that only a trained journalist can understand the rigors and ethics involved in

reporting the news. Glaser's study is significant because it begins to examine, at its core, how

modern technologies have changed our preconceived notion of the concept of journalism.

Glaser's research can be further explained by a study conducted by Lazaroiu in 2014.

Lazaroiu's research highlights the participation of the public in news production and sharing via

social media, and examines and evaluates social media as a source of news.

Lazaroiu (2014) found that social networks are generally the place where news is broken

first through user-generated content. In fact, the study suggests that journalists should use social

media to break stories and enhance their individual profiles. In addition, Lazaroiu found that

participatory media technologies have reduced the function of "gatekeeping" by journalists.

Traditionally, journalists were in control of the dissemination of news, and thus were able to

"gate keep" – inspect reality, filter information, and decide what news is to ensure the public

received verified information (Lazaroiu, 2014). Now, social media allows citizens to be involved in the newsgathering and sharing process, which effectively bypasses the role of the middleman, or the traditional journalist. Lazaroiu's research suggests that news consumption today is characterized by grazing across various professional and citizen produced news content.

Another trend in the scholarship has examined the way social media has altered the flow of media. For example, it is now commonplace for ordinary people to become caught up in breaking news, and provide the first accounts of images, video and facts about the events unfolding around them. Thus, professional journalists now share jurisdiction over the news, since citizens are participating in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution, and interpretation of events. Hermida (2010) examines this recent shift in news and media coverage.

First, Hermida calls for a reexamination of the word "ambient" as applied to news and journals. The term "ambient" has been used in journalism to describe the ubiquitous nature of news in today's society. However, his research suggests the proliferation of news on digital platforms has intensified the presence of ambient news, making it easier for citizens to maintain an awareness of what is taking place in the world around them (Hermida, 2010).

Traditionally, audiences have been largely separated from the journalistic process, defined by Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese in their work *Journalists as Gatekeepers* as the selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, and repeating of information to become news (Shoemaker et al., 2008). However, much like Lazaroiu (2014), Hermida argues that social media has created a shift toward a more participatory media environment. Widely available digital channels for the distribution of content have replaced limited one-way channels. Thus, Hermida (2010) suggests non-linear, many-to-many digital communication technologies have transferred the means of media production and dissemination into the hands of the public,

redefining the relationship between the audience and journalists. This research is significant because it raises questions about who can be described as a journalist, and how journalism itself is defined.

Just because audiences have become part of the news process, does not mean citizens are necessarily producing journalism within the established framework of accounts and analysis through narratives, with the aim of providing accurate and objective portrayals of reality (Hermida, 2010). Instead, Hermida suggests that ambient journalism presents a multi-faceted and fragment news experience that is characterized by citizens producing small pieces of content that can be collectively considered journalism. His study acknowledges the audience as both a sender and receiver of information. Lastly, Hermida discusses the role that the social networking site Twitter has played in ambient journalism. Twitter has emerged as a significant platform for people to report, comment, and share news about major events, with individuals performing some of the institutional functions of the professional journalist. Traditionally, the journalist has been the mechanism to filter, organize, and interpret information and deliver the news in "ready made packages" (Hermida, 2010). This was only possible in an environment where access to the means of media production was limited. However, Hermida (2010) argues that the thousands of acts of journalism taking place on Twitter each day make it impossible for an individual journalist to identify the collective sum of knowledge contained in the fragments of information, and thus bring meaning to the data. In this way, social media platforms such as Twitter have completely altered the flow of news and information communication.

Marketing

Marketers have become increasingly interested in social media after Cone Communications, a public relations agency for consumer brands based in Boston, published a

study in 2008. The study shows that 93 percent of social media users believe that companies

they buy from should have a presence in social media. It also suggests that 85 percent of social

media users believe a company should not only be present, but also interact with its consumers

via social media. In fact, 56 percent of users feel both a stronger connection and more

satisfaction with the service received by companies when they interact with them through social

media (Cone Communications, 2008). This research was groundbreaking at the time, as social

media was just becoming popular and had hardly ever been the subject of research studies. The

Cone Communications study provided marketers with a valid reason to begin examining the

implications of social media on their marketing strategies.

Companies, organizations, and marketers utilize a wide variety of tools and strategies to

communicate with consumers. Many of these strategies have become a solidified part of the

promotional mix, one of the four Ps of the marketing mix that describes the standard methods

that marketers use to interact with consumers, including all forms of communication an

organization uses to establish meaning as well as influence the buying behavior that is present

among existing and potential customers (Lake, 2016). These methods include advertising,

personal selling, public relations, publicity, direct marketing, and sales promotion. Mangold and

Faulds (2009) argue that social media should be considered a component of the promotional mix.

First, Mangold and Faulds establish what is meant by *integrated marketing communications,* or

IMC. The premise of IMC is rooted in marketers' attempts to coordinate and control various

elements of the promotional mix to produce a unified consumer-focused message that broadly

reflects the organization's fundamental values and achieves various organizational objectives

(Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In other words, IMC attempts to unify all pieces of marketing

communications to create a message that is consistent across all channels (West Virginia

University, 2017). Because of its ability to influence various aspects of consumer behavior –
including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, and post-
purchase communication and evaluation – Mangold and Faulds argue that social media should be
considered a component of the promotional mix and therefore be incorporated as an integral part
of an organization's IMC strategy (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Organizations use traditional IMC tools to talk to their customers. In this way, marketers
possess a high degree of control over the communication process. However, social media has
introduced a unique channel of communication in which customers can communicate with one
another. Gillin (2007) notes that, according to conventional marketing, a dissatisfied customer
would tell roughly ten people about his or her negative experience. However, he identifies in his
research that such a statistic is out of date. In the new age of social media, customers have the
tools to communicate with millions of other consumers virtually instantaneously. For this
reason, Mangold and Faulds examine the particular impact of social media on IMC strategy.
They note that the content, timing, and frequency of social-media based conversations that occur
between consumers are outside managers' direct control. Contemporary marketers cannot ignore
the phenomenon of social media because it has rapidly become the standard channel for
consumers who are disseminating information on products and services. Thus, a recent trend in
scholarship stresses that marketing managers must seek ways to incorporate social media into
their IMC strategies and recognize it as a crucial and standard element of the promotional mix
(Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The ability to reach vast audiences, being placeless, having low cost, and the popularity
of social media motivates marketers to take advantage of it in different ways, and recent studies
are examining this. One way for marketers to utilize social media is to increase brand loyalty;

social media provide a unique opportunity for brands to foster their relationships with customers. A study conducted by Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2012) suggests that brand communities operating on social media can enhance brand trust and loyalty by improving customer relationships with the brand, other consumers, the company, and the products. Relationship enhancement happens as a result of information sharing, which decreases information asymmetry, reduces uncertainty and increases predictability of the brand. They found that brand communities based on social media facilitate feelings of community, usefulness, and information sharing, and thus strengthen the social bonds among members and other elements of the brand (Laroche et al., 2012). Because of the way it can enhance brand loyalty, scholars argue that social media is an ideal environment for businesses to reach their customers.

A study conducted by Erdogmus and Cicek (2012) also evaluates the impact that social media has on increasing brand loyalty. The aim of their study was to understand the effect of social media marketing on brand loyalty formation from the perspective of the consumers. Previously, marketers used various traditional means to maintain the brand loyalty of their customers, including brand elements, classical marketing mix variables, events, sponsorships, and one-to-one marketing activities. However, Erdogmus and Cicek were quickly able to establish social media as a new, rapidly growing platform for building relationships with customers and forming a positive image of the brands in consumers' minds. Results showed that advantageous campaigns on social media were the most significant drivers of brand loyalty, followed by relevancy of the content and the popularity of the content among friends (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012).

In order to run an effective social media campaign and garner brand loyalty, Erdogmus and Cicek found that companies must carefully consider the benefits, values, and advantages the

campaign offers to consumers. The conclusion also indicated that brand loyalty is positively

affected by the different social media platforms and applications that the brand has to offer,

suggesting that consumers look for creative reasons and a variety of ways to engage with brands.

This aspect of their research is important because it offers concrete evidence to back up scholars'

claim that companies should focus on creating more engaging, participative, and interesting

applications and content on social media to draw their customer's interest (Erdogmus & Cicek,

2012).

Lastly, Erdogmus and Cicek discussed the relevancy of social media content and the

significance of social media popularity. They determined that relevancy is the second most

important factor affecting brand loyalty. Therefore, their research suggests that it is critical for

companies to be in-tune to the sociocultural environment of business, which is comprised of

consumers' interests, the activities that they participate in, popular perspectives, and their

lifestyle. This will ensure that content being shared on social media is as relevant as possible to

the targeted consumers, which in turn will likely increase social media engagement. Because the

impact of word-of-mouth marketing in online environments is extremely significant, Erdogmus

and Cicek also determined that the popularity of social media content among friends increases

brand loyalty of the consumers. Their research suggests social media users will favorably

respond to incentives provided by companies to spread the word about their presence and

campaigns by sharing the companies' social media content among their peers (Erdogmus &

Cicek, 2012).

Another wave of scholarship has recently examined the effect of social media on public

relations. Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) conducted a study that aims to identify and

discuss the growing popularity of social media and explore its potential impact on marketing

practices, especially marketing public relations.

Papasolomou and Melanthiou examine the concept of *marketing public relations,* or

MPR. MPR refers to public relations activities designed to support marketing objectives such as

raising awareness, informing and educating target audiences, gaining understanding, building

trust, giving customers a reason to buy, and motivating consumer acceptance (Papasolomou &

Melanthiou, 2012). Their research suggests MPR involving social media is centered on creating

talk about a product by encouraging intermediaries (connectors) such as traditional mass media,

the electronic media, or individuals to voluntarily pass a message about a product or company to

their audience of businesses or consumers. The study suggests that social media MPR adds a

unique dimension to the communication process by engaging parties other than the traditional

marketer and the receiver. Social media gives an opportunity for marketers to create a buzz

about a company and its products by connecting with people through dialogue, which is much

more personal, honest, and genuine. Papasolomou and Melanthiou's research is significant

because it implies that MPR enabled by social media gives companies the potential to create

stronger bonds with customers, create more positive customer attitudes, and enhance the

reputation of the firm (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012).

Research has shown that social media carries immense marketing power for companies

and business. This marketing power can be applied to various types of organizations, including

those in the sport industry. The growing presence of social media has important implications for

sport marketers, who must understand how it is affecting the sport business and what new

opportunities exist to reach to fans. However, extensive research has yet to be done on the effect

of social media in the sport industry; the present study will be participating in the beginnings of

this conversation. The goal of the present thesis is to examine the way in which social media has revolutionized three major components of fan engagement: immediacy, intimacy, and accessibility. It then examines how important it is for sport organizations to adopt social media marketing strategies in order to stay relevant in the sport world and to continue to expand and strengthen their fan base.

Methodology

The focus of my research was to analyze and examine the effects of social media on sport. Specifically, I studied how social media has changed the immediacy of sport consumption, the intimacy between fans and their favorite athletes and sports teams, and the accessibility of sport games and information to fans. Immediacy, intimacy, and accessibility were the focus of all questions asked and explored. My means of accomplishing this were two fold. First, I conducted an interview with the Digital Engagement Specialist of the Boston Bruins, a professional hockey team playing in the National Hockey League. Second, I analyzed the results of a survey asking participants to describe their social media habits as they relate to sports. While doing so, I paid close attention to the implications an increased presence and use of social media by fans and other sport organizations has on sport marketers.

The interview was conducted over the phone on November 27, 2017 with Boston Bruins and TD Garden Digital Engagement Specialist, Kelsey Ohman. Ohman was hired about three years ago as the Digital Engagement Specialist, a new role created by the team and TD Garden. Ohman's job is to take the Bruins social media – otherwise referred to simply as "social" – and put it into the perspective of the fans, all while giving it a better strategy and overarching alignment with the team brand. In the past, there was no one to help with content and fan engagement from a digital marketing perspective, so Ohman is now the primary individual who

works on marketing initiatives and all related social content, involving but not limited to community relations, ticket sales initiatives, and brand campaigns.

Ohman explained that she shares ownership of the Bruins social channels with the Bruins PR team. The PR team is responsible for live-tweeting and all other in-game coverage including goals and play-by-play, as well as practice updates, press releases, and media availability. During games, Ohman works with a remote photographer to get footage that can be used by the PR team. Ohman also provides the PR team with tools to make engaging content. For example, she provided them with a tool to build a visual starting lineup (instead of it being posted in plain text) and goal graphics. Ohman also plays a role in customer service on social channels, looking for questions and issues that can be answered and resolved. Lastly, as a part of fan engagement, Ohman looks for "delight opportunities" for fans, like bringing a small birthday celebration to someone in the audience.

This interview was recorded and lasted approximately one hour. This portion of data collection was qualitative because I used Ohman's testimony to analyze *how* social media has impacted sport; a quantitative analysis of statistics from a survey discussing social media usage in relation to sports is one thing, but talking directly to a professional sport marketer allowed me to gather information directly from the source. For a full list of questions and topics discussed, see Appendix A.

I developed a 25-question survey that asked participants about their social media habits regarding sports content. This survey was conducted through Google Forms and responses were submitted anonymously. The survey was closed after being open for one week, and collected a total of 108 responses from participants ages 17-27. Approximately 60 percent of respondents were female, and 40 percent were male. It was distributed electronically to current Assumption

College students via Facebook, email, and text – especially Assumption College seniors because the Assumption College Class of 2018 Facebook page was a readily accessible resource. Professor Elizabeth O'Hara, a sports professor at Assumption College, sent an email out to all students enrolled in sports classes this semester, encouraging them to take the survey. In addition, I was able to send the survey to friends who are currently attending other college/universities or working full time.

When discussing various social media platforms, the survey only mentioned Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit. I chose these platforms because, based on research and personal experience, these are the social media sites that are the most applicable and useful to sports fans. If appropriate, questions included an "other" option where participants could list a different social media platform if applicable. For a full list of survey questions, see Appendix B.

<div align="center">Research</div>

Social media has changed the way the world communicates, receives, and processes information. This is true in many aspects of life – and none more resounding than the sport industry. Through social media, athletes and teams have acquired unique broadcasting capabilities that are changing the ways that sports media is produced and consumed. This thesis examines how social media has changed the immediacy of sport consumption, the intimacy between fans and their favorite athletes and sports teams, and the accessibility of sport games and information to fans.

Immediacy

Social media has enabled sports teams to disseminate information into the hands of fans nearly simultaneously as the action unfolds and news breaks. Fans now have immediate access

to an unlimited wealth of information, scores, and highlights. In fact, survey results indicate that

32.2 percent of respondents that follow teams and athletes on social media do so primarily for

breaking news (trades, injuries, etc.). Because fans demand such information immediately, sports

teams must be able to meet their needs by providing it in an efficient manner. Ohman described

just how important communicating news quickly is in the sport industry, specifically for the

Boston Bruins. "Immediacy – that's a huge one for us, especially with any news or game

coverage in general," she explained. "Part of our social strategy is to be quick, to be the first [to

release information], and to be a reliable source." Ohman recognized that fans seek information

as quickly as they can receive it, so sports teams need to be prepared to deliver it immediately,

especially during games. Ohman explained that her team will often make social content and

develop a plan of how to execute it in advance, so by the time the puck drops on a game night,

Ohman and the Bruins PR team have content readily available to post right away. Other NHL

teams prefer to wait and get footage from the particular goal that was just scored before posting

it on social. "That might take two minutes, and that's two minutes we don't want to wait,"

Ohman said. Even in such a short amount of time, others can get their hands on the information

and share it, whether it is other beat reporters or fans. "We want to make sure we are the first [to

share the content], so it's crucial to have everything prepared in advance so it's easy to execute."

  An example of pre-developed social content is the Bruins starting lineup graphic. In the

past, the Bruins only included information about the starting lineup in the graphic. This year,

they wanted the graphic to convey information about every line, and not just the starting line.

However, lines change game-to-game and such information is usually not available until warm

ups, which leaves the Bruins graphic design team very little time to create content from scratch.

As a solution, Ohman and her team created a tool that would allow them to "fill in the blank"

with the proper player information on the predesigned graphic, enabling them to create the

graphic as a custom build during warm ups and effectively publish an engaging graphic

immediately.

While it is essential to prepare content ahead of time, such preparation can create the

challenge of keeping content refreshing. It is a "tricky balance," Ohman explained, to be the first

to release content, but to also keep it engaging. Sometimes, sponsorship activation can help keep

content new and intriguing. For example, the Bruins are currently partnered with EA Sports, a

creator and developer of sports video games. As part of the sponsorship, after almost every

Bruins goal scored, the official Bruins Twitter account (@NHLBruins) tweets a GIF of the goal

scorer celebrating in the EA Sports hockey video game, NHL 18. "We work with sponsors like

EA Sports to create a campaign that is both beneficial to their business endeavors and is still

engaging [for our fans]," Ohman said.

Such engaging content can be delivered to fans in a variety of ways. Some fans access

this content by simply checking their social media apps. Survey results indicate that 41.6 percent

of respondents check social media for sports updates one or more times daily, while 37.9 percent

check it once or a few times per week. This means that nearly 80 percent of respondents turn to

social media for sports updates. Some fans have social media notifications turned on for specific

sports teams and athletes, meaning they will receive an immediate alert every time a designated

account posts or shares new content. Of those 80 percent that turn to social media for sports

updates, approximately 30 percent have notifications turned on for particular sports teams and

athletes. Social media notifications are an effective way for fans to ensure they are alerted of

new content as soon as it is published, which only emphasizes how social media has increased

the immediacy of sport consumption.

Because social media is all about speed and immediacy, Ohman identified the need for the Bruins to continuously monitor content. The Bruins use a tool called Spredfast to monitor all social conversations. Ohman receives a trigger email from Spredfast if a player's tweet gets a significant amount of retweets or engagement. "That could be good or bad," Ohman notes. Similarly, if the Bruins verified Twitter account reaches a certain threshold of mentions, Ohman will be notified. "It's more of a proactive measure, just to make sure that we're aware of what's happening, just because social does move so quickly."

Intimacy

Fans are capitalizing on the interactivity offered by social media channels to directly engage with athletes and sports teams. Social media has created significantly more opportunities for fans to directly communicate with athletes and teams, without a third party intermediary. In addition, fans can access athletes and teams when it is personally convenient, and generally have free reign over message content. In fostering this communication, fans feel closer to athletes and teams, leading to an increased sense of participation, fan investment and eventually team loyalty.

The Boston Bruins like to interact with their fans over social media because such interaction fosters close fan-team relationships. "When fans talk to us and have a genuine interest in sharing something like a new jersey they got, we definitely like to engage and favorite that," Ohman said. Social media also enables the Bruins to create surprise and delight opportunities for fans in attendance at a game. For example, if someone is celebrating a birthday at a Bruins game and tweets about it, the Bruins can get that fan's seat location and deliver something special to them in person. "[By being active on social], we let fans know that we're listening to their conversations and that we're excited to be celebrating with them."

Social media also allows teams to show their fans how much they are appreciated. Last year in partnership with TD Bank as a part of "TDFansgiving," the Bruins gave out 100 custom prizes to fans on social that had tweeted about the Bruins during the year in some sort of positive way. For example, one particular girl drew an amazing piece of fan art of a player and shared it on social media. The Bruins printed out her picture, had the player sign it, and sent it back to her. "Social really helps us engage with those fans and just let them know that while we aren't able to answer every post that they send us, we are often looking and letting them know that they've been heard." A small gesture made possible by social media secured the Bruins another fan for life.

Not only can fans directly interact with their favorite teams, but they can also interact with their favorite players. "As we're getting younger players on the team, we're seeing them use social a little bit more," Ohman said. These young players are often more active on social as well. Social enables fans to talk directly with players and teams, which provides them with insight into a whole new side of sports that was not visible before. "It's nice that fans can engage with players and when they do engage back, I think that's definitely great and something that I love to see on social." Survey findings indicated that over 20 percent of respondents had a verified team, player, or sports figure interact with them on social media. "It's a very unique thing that social can offer," Ohman added.

Social media provides the channel for fans to closely interact with teams and players, but it can only work effectively if the content being distributed is friendly and engaging. "At the end of the day, fans love game content. If we tweet out that we won and there's a highlight with the winning goal, that is going to perform really well no matter what," Ohman said. But she also identified a need for behind the scenes content so fans can feel even more connected to their

favorite players and teams. Ohman explained that a key component of the Bruins social strategy

includes sharing information about players and their lives off the ice so the team as a whole is

more accessible and approachable. "Our team has a reputation in the city as being very down to

earth, regular folk in Boston. It's definitely part of our brand, so we like to share that."

Accessibility

With social media, any sports fan has access to a digital world of information, in-game

highlights, statistics, scores and direct connections to athletes. According to the survey, nearly

80 percent of respondents follow their favorite athletes and teams on social media, which

demonstrates that such information is easily accessible for most sports fans.

It is important to recognize that spectators do not have to be sitting in front of a TV or

have tickets to a game in order to stay updated. Instead, viewers can have access to immediate

updates during games from social media from almost any physical location, bringing them closer

to the action regardless of proximity to the rink. "Social media let's you experience the game in

a different way, even if you're not necessarily in a stadium or an arena," Ohman recognized.

"Even if you are [in attendance at a game], having that extra screen and channel is definitely a

new thing that social brought to the table."

Since fans are now "watching" games through social media, it is important for teams to

try to convey that in-game experience to them in different ways. "What we try to do, specifically

on Twitter, is bring the in-game experience to social," Ohman said. The Bruins social strategy

includes integrating in-game elements, like posting pictures of fans in the crowd that ordinarily

would have appeared solely on the jumbotron. "We try to bring more visual elements into our

coverage so it's not just giving [fans] updates, but giving them an experience too."

Accessibility also includes the important component of reach. Although the Bruins are based in Boston and have fans primarily in New England, Ohman noted that everyone who has access to social media has access to Bruins content. "We definitely see a lot of conversation from all over the country and all over the world during games. It's people who aren't in the market to get NESN or even NHL TV," Ohman said.

Knowing that teams can reach millions in a single post changes the way social media has been done in the past; teams must actually consider sending specific messages to a narrower, more targeted audience. For example, if a Bruins game is going to be played as scheduled despite a snowstorm, the Bruins do not need to blast that to their whole social following because they would unnecessarily be reaching people everywhere, even people outside the country who would not be attending a game in Boston. Instead, Ohman said that is something they would post on their Facebook event page for that particular game. "Social media has made it so accessible to follow us and be a fan," Ohman said. "We always try to keep in mind that our reach is very broad. Even though we think we're only in Boston, we're reaching a lot more people."

Because of the vast amount of people social can reach, teams strive to integrate social media into their marketing campaigns. "Social is unique in that you can often reach a new audience, especially when you're going into the world of paid social," Ohman explained. "It's one of the places where we can find people who maybe wouldn't have considered going to a Bruins game before." Because of its accessibility, social media is an integral tool used by sport marketers to spread awareness of their different initiatives.

Conclusion

Social media marketing is a unique and widespread channel for teams and athletes to communicate directly and quickly with fans, and vice versa. Because it is so prevalent and accessible to fans, it is imperative for sports teams to have well developed and highly functioning social media teams, much like Ohman and the Bruins PR staff. In addition, the social media teams need the appropriate resources and tools to execute their social media strategy properly. This will ensure the proper, consistent, and everyday execution of the team's brand message, which will increase loyalty over time by giving fans not just a team, but also an identity to root for.

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Appendix A

List of Questions and Topics Discussed During Interview with Kelsey Ohman

1. How do you think social media has changed the face of sport?

2. How do you think social media has changed the immediacy by which fans receive sport news and information?

- What are the Bruins doing to participate in this?

- Live-tweeting, Twitter notifications

- No more waiting for information or scores

3. How do you think social media has played a role in enabling fans to develop intimate relationships with their favorite teams/players?

- How do the Bruins interact with fans on social media? What are the types of tweets the Bruins reply to?

- Players replying to fans

- Direct communication from fan to athlete/team

- You don't have to meet your favorite athlete anymore to be able to talk to them

- Athletes share family life, personal life, personal opinions - give themselves deeper dimension, more than just player on the ice

- How does this impact team loyalty?

4. How do you think social media has altered the accessibility of sporting events to fans?

- Access to social media means access to unlimited world of sports

- Access from anywhere, don't have to be home in front of a TV

- Can follow entire game without actually watching it

5. Specific player accounts

- Do individual players have a social media strategist?

- Do you/Bruins control any of the content they put out?

6. Bruins social media

- As a digital engagement specialist, what role do you play in Bruins social media?

- How long have you been with the Bruins? Have you seen marketing strategies change over the years?

- Talk about #InOurBlood campaign

- How big is the Bruins social media marketing team? Different roles/positions and responsibilities? How many people have access to the Bruins account (for sake of consistency in tweets)?

- How much focus/emphasis do the Bruins put on social media marketing compared to other types of marketing (traditional print, billboards, etc.)?

- Thoughts on Bruins fan accounts?

7. Marketing through social media

- Discuss how social media has given unique leverage to market players, team, and brand

- How has social media impacted brand/team loyalty? Increase/strengthen/expand fan base?

- Implications for sport marketers - need to stay relevant

- What opportunities exist to reach fans?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. Age
   - Younger than 18
   - 18-22
   - 23-27
   - 28-32
   - 33-40
   - 41-50
   - Older than 50

2. Gender
   - Female
   - Male

3. Are you a student at Assumption College?
   - Yes
   - Other college/university
   - High school
   - Not in school, have a full time job
   - Other

4. What social media platforms/sites do you use/are active on? Select all that apply.
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - Snapchat
   - Twitter
   - YouTube
   - Reddit
   - I don't have social media
   - Other

5. On average, how many hours do you spend on social media per day?
   - Less than an hour
   - 1-2 hours
   - 3-5 hours
   - 5-7 hours
   - 7+ hours
   - I don't have social media

6. Would you describe yourself as a sports fan? (Do you watch games regularly and follow certain teams?)
   - Yes
   - No

7. Are you a New Englad sports fan (Patriots, Red Sox, Celtics, Bruins)?
   - Yes
   - No

8. What sport(s) do you follow? Check all that apply.
   - National Football League (NFL)
   - National Hockey League (NHL)
   - National Basketball Association (NBA)
   - Major League Baseball (MLB)
   - Major League Soccer (MLS)
   - Premier League Football
   - I don't follow sports
   - Other

9. What is your favorite sports team?

10. Do you follow your favorite sports team(s) on social media (their verified accounts)?
    - Yes
    - No
    - I don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite sports team(s)

11. If yes to question 10 above, what platforms/sites? Check all that apply.
    - Facebook
    - Instagram
    - Snapchat
    - Twitter
    - YouTube
    - Reddit
    - I answered NO to question 10 or don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite sports team(s)
    - Other

12. Do you follow your favorite athlete(s) on social media (their verified accounts)?
    - Yes
    - No
    - I don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite athlete(s)

13. If yes to question 12 above, what platforms/sites? Check all that apply.
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Twitter
- Reddit
- I answered NO to question 12 or don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite athlete(s)
- Other

14. Do you follow any fan accounts for your favorite team(s)/athlete(s)?
- Yes
- No
- I don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite sports team(s)/athlete(s)

15. If yes to question 14 above, what platforms/sites? Check all that apply.
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Reddit
- I answered NO to question 14 or don't have social media and/or don't have a favorite team(s)/athlete(s)
- Other

16. What is the primary reason you follow sports teams/athletes on social media?
- Stay updated on scores
- Breaking news (trades, injuries, etc.)
- Buzz, gossip and rumors
- To learn about athletes' personal lives
- To interact with favorite athletes/teams
- I don't follow sports teams/athletes on social media
- Other

17. What athlete/team is your favorite to follow on social media? Why?

18. How often do you check social media sites for sports updates?
- 3 times or more per day
- 1-2 times per day

- Few times per week
- Once per week
- I don't check social media for sports updates

19. Do you have social media notifications turned on for any athlete or team?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don't have social media

20. If yes to question 19 above, what platforms/sites? Check all that apply.
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - Snapchat
   - Twitter
   - YouTube
   - Reddit
   - I answered NO to question 19 or don't have social media
   - Other

21. How do you primarily interact with sports teams/athletes you follow on social media?
   - Like/favorite
   - Share/retweet
   - Comment/reply
   - Private message
   - I don't interact with sports accounts
   - Other

22. Has a verified athlete, team, or sports figure ever replied/liked your content or interacted with you on social media?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don't have social media

23. If yes to question 22 above, what platforms/sites? Check all that apply.
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - Snapchat
   - Twitter
   - YouTube
   - Reddit

- I answered NO to question 22 or don't have social media
- Other

24. Has your use of social media to engage in/follow sports brought you any unique opportunities?
- Yes
- No
- I don't use social media to engage in/follow sports

25. When you want sports news, what platform/site do you primarily turn to?
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Reddit
- Other