WHITE PAPER

Building a Loyal Fanbase

How Sports Organizations Use Social Media
Be it hockey, football, soccer, baseball or anything else that leads to painted faces, filled seats, and cheering fans, sports fans are incredibly active on social media. They're passionate and they voice their passion on Twitter, Facebook and every other social network out there.

Many sports teams, in both minor and professional leagues, have learned to harness that passion. They engage fans, they start conversations, and they contribute to the overall experience of sports. In doing so, they also boost business. Happy, loyal fans buy tickets and memorabilia and, perhaps most importantly, spread team news, information and passion to the people that surround them. Considering 92% of people still trust recommendations from friends and family (more than any other type of marketing), this word of mouth sharing is essential for business success.

All of this can be summarized in the words of Brian Jennings, the Chief Marketing Officer of the NHL, who explained: “As the famous Peter Drucker once said, ‘The purpose of business is to create a customer.’ In our instance, the business that we're in is to create a fan.”

Playing by the Social Media Rules

The Los Angeles Kings are in a very untraditional ice hockey market. With sun and beaches abound, not many Californians grow up playing a sport on ice.

Yet, the Kings have managed to attract and maintain quite a dedicated fan following. Over the last few years, a growing number of people have pledged their allegiance to the hockey team and helped to sell out the Staples Center on a consistent basis. Part of this can be attributed to the teams success, having emerged as Stanley Cup champions in both 2012 and 2014.

But another part can be attributed to what is one of the most confident, controversial and human social media strategies in professional sports.

This white paper will examine how social media is advancing the sporting industry by increasing fan loyalty. It will also break down some of the social strategies that are helping organizations see business success.
The Kings’ social media team has made headlines with several tweets over the last two years. From calling out opposing teams after big playoff wins to quoting Wayne’s World, the Twitter account has playfully stirred up the emotions of opposing fans while pleasing the home crowd.

But what has it accomplished? Well, for one, the Kings gained 87,358 new Twitter followers (a 224% increase) in two short months during the Kings’ 2012 playoff run, when their fan-like tweets and jokes were arguably at their most frequent.

This voice was deliberately set out in the Kings’ social strategy, which supported their success. Establishing guidelines is key to effective real-time engagement, so their playful jabs were actually part of the game plan.

Social media is helping teams and organizations to build connections with fans that weren’t possible a decade ago. Here are 3 ways that sports organizations can build stronger fan loyalty through social programs:

1. Humanize and Personalize Teams and Athletes

Part of offering unprecedented access to fans is that they inevitably end up interacting with people. This human-to-human contact is a game changer for professional sports organizations.

Whether or not you agree with their tactics, the Los Angeles Kings took the risk and did something few other teams have done: they ditched the corporate line. Putting the script aside and speaking from the heart (and speaking as fans themselves) the Kings’ social media team added a level of humanity to their social network that struck a chord with people. This undeniably helped them gain followers as people lauded the account’s tone and approach.

When a team ignores the passion of the game, the rivalries and controversies, in favour of a neutral and politically correct approach, they miss an opportunity to put themselves on the level of their fans. After losing to a rival team, fans don’t want to hear “it was a good game,” they want to hear “we’ll get them next time.” Fans want to connect with other fans and since many of the people working for sports teams are fans of the teams themselves, they should use that rather than hide it away. Sports content is shareable because it’s emotional. In embracing their own passion for the team, the Kings organization was able to channel the passion of their fans as well and increase their following in the process.

In terms of athletes, getting to meet, speak to or interact with your favourite player is a dream shared by countless sports fans, young and old. Only a decade or two ago, this dream was pretty much limited to those who could afford to attend games, special events or autograph signings. That’s no longer the case. The humanizing effect of social media is obvious. Athletes have taken to social media like wildfire, and while many of them use it sparingly, others are prone to responding to questions, retweeting fans and generally interacting with the people that idolize them. From discovering what video games they play and shows they watch to seeing the charities they contribute to, these interactions can make a major impact on fans. In extreme cases, tweets have even lead athletes to join pickup games and go on fun dates! The more relatable the athlete, it seems, the greater the chance that a fan feels a personal connection with them.

Whether they’re team-organized Q&A sessions or spontaneous discussions, these social media conversations have brought fans closer than ever to professional athletes. The contribution this has made to fan loyalty is evident in the follower count of athletes, including Cristiano Ronaldo, John Cena, Maria Sharapova and many others who rank among the most-followed individuals on social media.
2. Offer Fans Unprecedented Access to Teams Through Unique Content

Although sports organizations are inherently dependant on fans for business success, so much of what they do goes on behind the scenes. From training and trades to more simple things like meals and travel, much of what sports organizations and their athletes do on a day-to-day basis occurs out of sight.

Social media has changed that. Many teams now offer “behind-the-scenes” content on social channels. Instagram photos, YouTube clips and other resources are being used by these organizations to offer exclusives to their followers. In doing so, they’ve managed to attract dedicated followings who keep coming back for more unique content. Something as simple as showing teammates celebrating on a plane or offering photos of new training facilities can go viral amongst fans of a particular organization.

The success of a sports organization’s social channels is often dependant on them offering unique content that is not available anywhere else. This can come in the form of traditional content, contests for social followers, or real-time updates during games for those who are unable to watch or listen live. One example of unique social content comes in the form of a second screen for sporting events. Organizers of the Superbowl XLVII in New Orleans created a customized social media command center to highlight the social media interactions of fans around the big game.

The advantages of being honest, open and human on social outweigh the risks. But there are risks. Organizations should make the extra effort to teach employees and even athletes the principles of social media etiquette. Thankfully training programs like Hootsuite University make that a straightforward process.

### Differences in Tactics

**Broadcast**
- Front office in control
- One way/Delivering a message
- Repeating the message
- Focused on the brand
- Educating
- Front office creates content

**Social Media**
- Fans in control
- Two way/Part of a conversation
- Adapting the message
- Focused on the fans/adding value
- Influencing, involving
- User created content/co-creation

*Source: Pursuant Sports*
3. Make Fans Contributors to Teams and Unite Them

While dedicated sports fans buy jerseys, paint their faces and attend games to show their loyalty to the team, in the past they've had a very limited role in contributing to and being involved in an organization.

In the past, sports organizations — like almost all companies — used traditional media channels like television and radio to broadcast to fans, to deliver a brand-focused message. Social media turns the tables and puts the fans in control of what content performs well. Unsurprisingly, this happens to be the content that focuses on the fans or pulls them into the conversation.

The idea of co-creation has major implications on how involved fans feel in their teams. By asking fans to submit photos, comments, videos and suggestions, and then highlighting this content on official channels, you not only show that you're listening but that they have a role in your team.

A fan that feels like they're contributing is going to be a fan for life. This is especially true of children. The Liverpool FC football (soccer) team has a website dedicated to artistic submissions from young fans. Placing their drawings and art on the team website or social media channels is a great way to cement their passion for the team and create lifelong fans. Social media is forever, and that's a good thing when it gives a fan a memorable experience that they can hang on to and share.

Leagues have managed to pull fans in as contributors as well. Major League Baseball, for example, has let fans vote on Twitter or by text for players that they want to see on the All-Star teams. In this way, fans know that they've had a direct impact on the selection of players. Other examples include voting for “the play of the year” or the league’s “fan favourite” player. The inclusion of the fan on such a basic level can have a significant impact on their loyalty.

Social media has also helped increase fan loyalty without any participation of the professional sports organizations themselves. The most dedicated fans have shown themselves to be very interested in joining or creating communities with their fellow supporters on social channels. These fan communities help promote and support the teams while building a strong bond among fans, without necessarily involving the team at all.

Conclusion

By offering exclusive content, being honest and human, and involving fans in the organization on social media channels, sports teams, athletes and leagues of all levels can increase fan loyalty and have a lasting impact on their business success.

Watch ‘The NHL Story’ for more on how sports organizations use social media
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