

Chapter 30

The Potential of Social Media Use in Sports Clubs – Fan Communication and Knowledge Management

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1. Introduction

The motto of the Catalan club “Més que un club” meaning “sport is more than just business and sports clubs are more than enterprises” well reflects that sport fans are not just customers, games are not just products (for the fans) and commitment to the club cannot be bought.

The role of sports organizations is to foster the creation of the positive history shared by the team and its fans. The prove of how unique is the relationship between the two is that even the failures of the team (or in more economic terms “product defects”), do not cause the recipient (fan) to change his emotions or give up on the shared history, and become a fan of the opponent team.

As noted by Cialdini in case of defeat fans refer to the situation as “THEY lost”, and in case of victory “WE won”, but they still remain loyal to the team (Cialdini, 2010, p. 216). Another issue, which demonstrates the strength of this fan-club relationship is hooliganism at stadiums – customers buying their favorite products do not fight for the good name of their favorite brands of products. Additionally, positive fan behaviors, are also not typically imitated by customers – no one chants “Lipton” or paints the logo of the brand on the face.

The issues presented above give an insight into the behavior of fans. Therefore, the main activities undertaken by the sports clubs should result in building, maintaining and enriching relationship with them. When discussing the use of social media and knowledge management, one cannot forget the fans who usually remain the followers of the team much longer than do presidents, coaches, and players of the respective clubs, what every company can envy.

The article consists of three parts, which are (1) social media in sports clubs, (2) knowledge management in sports clubs, and (3) the use of social media in knowledge management. The article is based on the review of the scientific and sports literature as well as long-term observation of the practice of sports clubs and collaboration with them.

2. Types of sports clubs

Football Club Barcelona, Urban Athletics Club Torun, Asseco Resovia Rzeszow SA – three sports clubs, and each of them differs in size, organizational and legal structure, as well as, number of disciplines practiced in the club. This Catalan team, is a multi-sections club, with rugby being equally strong discipline as football (the club's rugby team won sixteen Spanish King's Cups). Moreover, FC Barcelona has very interesting membership structure, as the club is owned by more than 170 thousand stakeholders.

Located in Torun, City Athletics Club is different from the aforementioned in every aspect. City Athletics Club is an Association of Physical Culture focused on promotion of sports.

Asseco Resovia SA, is another a one-section club. It should be remarked that while Torun's club is an association, the organization based in Rzeszow (Asseco Resovia SA) is already a commercial entity and more specifically a joint-stock company.

These three sports organizations described above differ in many aspects. In Poland, Associations of Physical Culture are in majority (currently there are more than 13,000 of them (GUS, 2012). The clubs operating as limited liability companies (about 90 units) were obliged to accept this form of entity due to the current legislation, and more specifically by the Act of 25 June 2010 on Sport (Ustawa o sporcie, 2010). While Associations of Physical Culture are supposed to be based on social activities of its members (Górna, Szopa, 2009, p. 61), sports clubs in the form of a company must be profit-oriented. Therefore, the latter, which participate in the top league games most often, are the subject of this article.

3. Communication on social media in the context of sport clubs

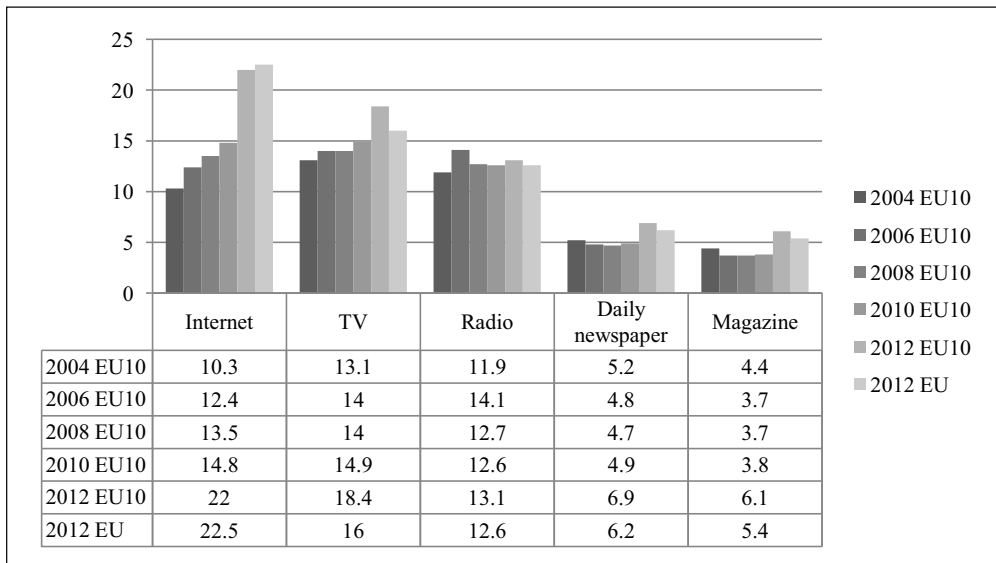
The availability of the Internet and the possibilities of communication provide by social media, as well as the development of mobile devices, result in rising interest in new media.

Social media can be characterized by unprecedented potential for customization and personalization, and are much more flexible than limited and rigid television program. This allows fans to customize wide scope of online services offered by range of sports clubs to their own needs and schedule (Levinson, 2010, p. 14). By creating their YouTube channel, Facebook profile, Twitter and Google+ accounts, sports clubs continuously attempt to earn fan's trust through providing a regular dose of information, and more importantly, receiving feedback from fans. Reading blogs referring to sport clubs' activities gives them the possibility of observing what fans have to say about a certain team or club (Li, 2009, p. 44). As a result, the negative opinions should initiate the improvement of the current state of affairs. On the other hand, the positive comments may serve as a roadmap showing the right direction in which the sports organization should strive (Hastings, 2010, p. 266).

The Figure 1 below presents the results of the research conducted by IAB Europe. The study related to the weekly number of hours fans spend on browsing the sports information. Over the years (2004-2012). In 2012 the research was extended to all the countries within European Union. The chart below depicts that over the years 2004-2012 the number of hours spent on browsing the sport-related information on the Internet increased over two times (from 10.3 to 22.5 hours in the whole EU). No other medium has recorded such increase in popularity. Therefore, it can be concluded that also sports clubs should actively promote their activities with the use

of tools available on the World Wide Web. They must also keep in mind that communication there must be interactive, which means that both sport organizations and fans exchange the information and the clubs' role is not only limited to providing information but they also need to listen to their fans and respond to the comments and enquires from their followers on a regular basis (IAB Europe, 2012, p. 8).

Figure 1. The number of hours spent by the fans on browsing sport-related information weekly



Source: IAB Europe, 2012, p. 8, <http://www.iabeurope.eu/files/2713/6852/2685/iab20europe20sport20and20the20shift20to20interactive20media20report1.pdf> [01.01.2014].

The responsibility for administering social media channels in Sports Federations (such as the International Olympic Committee) has been usually delegated to a special unit, whereas in sports clubs, this is a bottom-up process initiated by club supporters. It starts with citizen journalism (referred to also as a participatory or public journalism), which is fairly widespread in the area of sport. Articles are enhanced by photos uploaded by amateur photographers, who are fans of the club. The events during the game are recorded and uploaded on YouTube. At the same time, there exists the official website of the club or fan club, where the data such as the results of the games played, games schedule and the information of what is going on in the club is published (Drzymała, 2009, p. 147).

A few people involved in running a fan blog, or a website dedicated to a particular sporting club think about profit, most of them are enthusiasts infected with love for their team. It should be considered a success when a club (the coaching staff, players, management) constantly collaborates with the club's supporters involved in building its presence on social media (for example giving away free tickets to a game, being available for the interviews, sharing current information about players, etc.) (Parus, Cieślicka, Napierała, 2013, pp. 55-62). It can be observed that even the largest organizations (sports clubs such as Manchester United, Real Madrid) delegate the administration of social media channels to their fans.

Fans satisfy their own needs by creating a fan page or administrating an official profile on social media platform, running a blog for their favorite team – it was found that creation of websites, blogs or active involvement in online groups and discussion forums satisfy the traditional need for recognition and being respected (Mazurek, 2008, p. 133).

5. Social media for knowledge management

The intellectual capital is recognized as the most valuable asset of any organization (Quin, 1992) and same applies to the sports clubs.

The technologies related to social media allow companies to create a unique environment and organizational culture which supports collaboration. The online knowledge management tools are not limited to e-learning platforms, as Threderick remarks “the biggest benefit related to social media technologies does not lie in its novel technologies but in the participatory nature of knowledge creation” (Threderick, 2006, pp. 228-234). The available tools should not be therefore treated as tools itself but as facilitators enabling the utilization of collective intelligence (Maguire, 2008, p. 16).

6. Knowledge management in sports clubs

The manager’s knowledge about the opponents’ disposition, their favorite output composition, tactics; scout’s knowledge about promising juniors; and service technician’s knowledge about weather conditions are all important elements of the sports club’s knowledge base and effectively managing all this information contributes, to a great extent, to the success of sport organization.

While the collection and storage of knowledge is important in sports clubs, Fulda says that “the foundation of an efficient knowledge system is the ability to acquire and analyze sources of information” (Latusek-Jurczak, 2012, p. 220). Aspect of knowledge management in health clubs aptly described Kowalczyk and Nogalski, who write that “the organization should be able to ‘think’ – by listening to, seeing and feeling the environment and their own knowledge resources” (Kowalczyk, Nogalski, 2007, p. 10). So should it be in sports organizations, which are influenced by the external environment to greater extent than the internal relations.

Knowledge management in sports clubs can be divided into two areas – internal and external, and each of them can be divided further in relation to the role each department plays. Naturally, the importance of different departments increases in proportion to the size of the club and its success. When the inside of the organization is considered, in addition to the standard administration department, the club should consist of a sports division that gathers information on both coaches and players’ skills, and all kinds of related statistics (explicit knowledge) – (this knowledge is used by organizations dealing with widely understood subject of measurement in sports, as well as the broadcast media). The tacit knowledge such as the knowledge acquired by the coaches on the current disposition of players, which they acquire during the talks, training and sparring, is also of significant importance. However, it is not often archived outside of the circle coach–assistant–player. This knowledge, in spite of usually heavily relying on experience, intuition and the coach’s abilities is essential while designing the strategy on how to compete with a rival (Kaczmarek, Walczak, 2009, p. 33).

Another important group that should be managed by the club are volunteers. Although it is very often an overlooked group, it plays a very important role in achieving success of the organization, which is often emphasized by external observers, delegates of the international federation, fans, players and the organizers themselves (Marchel, 2013, p. 187). Sport volunteering during the games (e.g. Football) is an event volunteering, and during the event itself, there is a need for more than 50 volunteers. Recruiting so many people who do not receive salary, and assigning them tasks appropriate to their skills requires prior reading of their skills profiles. A well-chosen group of volunteers is the strength of the organization. Therefore, more and more event organizers prefer to pay for a database of volunteers rather than carry out all the recruitment tasks by themselves.

As people cannot be programmed to always work the same way, the human factor knowledge management faces challenges in how to quantify their knowledge. This was showed by the response of Shigeo Nagashima, one of the greatest baseball players of all time and is referred in Japan to as, “Mr. Baseball”, who asked how he can so effectively embrace opportunities and conduct daring raids, in response used the language of symbols and gestures, but was not able to explain exactly what he meant. Finally Nagashima simply said, “you have to feel it” (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 2000, p. 25).

In this chapter, the authors focused mainly on the role the coach plays in the process of knowledge management. However, it should be remembered that the sports club does not consists only of the coaching staff. All the employees within the organization should be a resource, which all the time increases its value and is not only an asset limited to implementing the current tasks which they were entrusted with (Stosik, Morawski, 2009, p. 58).

Therefore, the role of the coach, who bears the burden of responsibility for the success of his charges, is to holistically interpret the knowledge about the external conditions (knowledge about the tactics of opponents, the composition of output), and the knowledge gained within the organization (information about the preparation of athletes).

The necessary skills of a coach can be therefore compared to the skills of knowledge manager (Wróblewska, 2008, p. 295):

- possessing excellent communication and interpersonal skills, while not being too dominant;
- being familiar with the issues of modern technology (e.g. Internet, intranet, groupware);
- knowledge of building positive and stimulating organizational culture;
- demonstrating the ability to empathize;
- having basic knowledge of financial accounting;
- having the ability to formulate mental models, for the creation of new concepts;
- having the ability to use various methods of knowledge creation and encourage employees to express their ideas.

After analyzing the skills of knowledge manager listed above, it can be concluded that the coach and his assistants might only have problems with issues concerning accounting and financial aspects of running a club. This indicates that a coach has to be a specialist in knowledge management (ironically, even when he is not familiar with the knowledge management concept).

As mentioned above, knowledge management in sports clubs does not relate only to the internal aspects of the organization. The institutions working for the popularization of the physical culture also have to focus on acquiring information about the fans who participate or will participate in the events. The bigger number of the event’s participants, the larger revenues for the club – not only from the ticket sales, but also sponsoring or media rights. Therefore, it is important for the sports organization to realize the importance of relationship management with clients-fans.

This process should also involve managing specific information on the individual client (fan) and careful administering of all the points of contact with him in order to increase his loyalty (Kotler, 2005, p. 72). One of the components of acquiring the knowledge about fans is taking advantage of the data included in the personalized tickets to the sports events. By having the information about sex, age or place of living of the ticket holder, it can be determined what group of the recipients is interested in certain kind of events. Another element, based on which a database about the clients and their needs can be created is the use of social media and more specifically the comments posted there.

Nowadays, technological progress provides us with new opportunities to communicate, what contributes to the continuous exchange of knowledge regardless of one's location.

While a lot is said about the use of social media for external communication, not much attention is paid to the internal communication within organizations. According to Krok any computer program used in the company supports knowledge management process in some way, for example by facilitating the processes such as collection, creation, sharing of knowledge and using it for the benefit of the organization. In the area of sport Collaboration Support Systems and e-learning platforms are used most commonly (Krok, 2011, p. 53). As previously mentioned, the sporting event is organized by more than a dozen people (some of which are employees and some volunteers).

The popularity of social media gives sports clubs a chance to use them in their knowledge management efforts. Creating profiles on social media platforms for volunteers, or community who share the common interest in a specific event (e.g. a race, a conference, or a festival) opens up another channel of communication. Thanks to these channels, people interested can keep track of the situation concerning for example the number of event participants who are already on-site, or access the messages from the organizer's office through smartphones, tablets, laptops.

It should not be forgotten that the effectiveness of the knowledge management in sports clubs can be assessed by evaluating its final effects. Treacy, Wiersema and Zack (Guszczyńska-Malec, Rutkowska, 2013, p. 76) draw attention to three main areas: (1) trust in the relationship with the customer, and thus ensuring that the fan will receive the experience he had expected (not only in the terms that were asserted by the club), (2) product, which is related to the experience of exciting sporting spectacle, (3) operational excellence, referring to the efficiency of organization of the sports event.

Most often, sports clubs (organizational staff) focus on how the event maintains and strengthens the relationship with their fans. Therefore, the knowledge management strategy should (but does not always) involve the acquisition of knowledge about the customer (here a fan), in order to effectively utilize this knowledge later on. An example of this is the game in the top Polish league in men's volleyball, where most clubs organize a separate area for children during the games (the idea came from the demand for this kind of facilities indicated by fans) where children are supervised by trained volunteers, while parents enjoy the exciting volleyball tournament.

7. Conclusion

The use of social media in fan communication and knowledge management in sports clubs is a result of technological progress. Sports clubs have to continually adapt their systems to meet the market needs for the convenience of direct customers (fans). Assuring the effective

flow of information and its simplicity is an important factor contributing to the competitiveness of the club's offer. Because of the specificity of the sport environment (as previously noted in the context of the failure of one's favorite team) which is very different from the companies operating in the food or transport industry, sports clubs need to show that they are a viable source of alternative leisure activities.

Increasing the knowledge about people, who should be the target clients of the sports.

Not without a reason fans are referred to as the twelfth player (in football) – as they can both improve and spoil the atmosphere of the match. That is why sports clubs should treat their fans not only as guests, but more as household members. Providing with the possibility of downloading applications related to the league on smartphone, or purchasing online memorabilia for fan is not enough. "The twelfth player" should be able to constantly contact the club. Social networking sites facilitate this process and looking at the profiles of Polish clubs one can see that they are much more frequently updated than the official clubs' websites.

The second aspect of knowledge management is the ability to harvest the information about volunteers and efficiently analyze these data, in order to enable the best possible organization of the event. There is no single correct model of this process – it depends on the size of the event and the experience of those participating in its organization. One thing is certain – knowledge management through the use of social media fosters efficient communication, what should be appreciated in this world moving at increasingly rapid pace.

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