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Gaining S-T-E-A-M: A General Athletic Department Social Media Strategy

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In the 10 years since the invention of Facebook, social media sites have become an indispensable part of the marketing and communications strategy employed by a broad spectrum of organizations, including university athletic departments. While social media is almost universally used, a review of academic literature suggests the study of deployment of social media resources, and analysis of their effectiveness, is still very much in preliminary stages. Professional literature on social media use is out in front of peer-reviewed research. Therefore, we use Funk's framework for social media practices as a point of departure, offering a social media strategy specifically for university athletic departments, grounded in Social Marketing Theory. Using a case study of Old Dominion University, a mid-sized, U.S. college athletic department, the authors analyze the 40 social media pages run by the department in comparison to guidelines created from the Funk framework and the growing body of academic literature, conduct interviews with practitioners in the athletic department, and a focus group of fans. Using this data, the authors create a case study-based list of best practices, known by the acronym S-T-E-A-M, which could assist similar university athletic departments in their use of social media.

Keywords: social media; Twitter, Facebook, university athletics, athletic promotion, NCAA

Univiversity athletic departments are facing increasing pressure to monetize activities in the wake of rising higher education expenditures (Sander, 2011; Sparvero & Warner, 2013). Given the financial pressures university athletic departments face, it is imperative they explore every option for generating publicity and revenue, including adoption of social media. However, athletic departments have little guidance on how to utilize social media as a marketing tool. Despite being advised to evaluate best practices from other industries to look for strategies that can be modified and applied to college athletics (Dittmore, McCarthy, McEvoy, & Clavio, 2013), few college athletic departments have been systematic in their approach. Hodge, Pederson, and Walker (2015) note: "While numerous sport organizations have implemented SNS strategies, there is little guidance on how to effectively communicate with consumers" (p. 285).

According to Kevin DeShazo, the CEO of Fieldhouse Media, it is challenging just to set social media goals for an athletic department. He notes:

> Of the 20 or so departments I've spoken with over the past two months about strategy, less than 5% have a documented social media marketing strategy. They use Twitter/Facebook/Instagram/YouTube and other platforms as a department, but there's no real direction or goal beyond "get information to our fans" that they are trying to achieve. These are large D1 [Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or NCAA] programs all the way down to DIII [Division III] departments. I had a conversation with one yesterday afternoon who said, "We have all of these fans and followers, but now what? We don't know what to do next/how to engage with them." It's a common theme. (K. DeShazo, personal communication, May 29, 2014).

Academic studies have attempted to offer guidance on how to turn social media networks with rich, user-generated content into profit-turning marketplaces (Akar & Topcu, 2011; Shadkam & O'Hara, 2013). Some characterizations of the potential of social media have been buoyantly optimistic (O'Hern & Kahle, 2013) while others note social media's dual role as communications tool and marketing device limit its utility at achieving monetary aims (Swani, Milne, Cromer, & Brown, 2013). Social media has been viewed in practitioner-focused studies as a system of garnering market share through efforts that are complementary, rather than integral, to content (Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013), and therefore, evaluations of the effectiveness of social media campaigns have been somewhat limited in scope (Groza, Peterson, Sullivan, & Krishnan, 2012; James, Albrecht, Litchfield, & Weishaar, 2013).

As Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, and Nzindukiyimana (2015) note, many social media studies have been conducted on sport in the past seven years. However, relatively few of these studies are focused on effective social media practice. Hipke and Hachtmann (2014) suggest best practices for attracting customers, and other studies have focused on fan identification and engagement (Hopkins, 2013; Watkins, 2014). In the college and university setting, studies of social media campaigns have largely been limited to that bottom-line imperative, selling tickets (Boatwright, 2013; Popp & McEvoy, 2014). Stoldt, Miller, and Vermillion (2013) relied on self-reflection by athletic administrators themselves in their analysis of the state of the field. Dixon, Martinez, and Martin (2015) also relied on feedback from marketing professionals within athletic

departments as to whether organizational objectives were being met. What is missing is an attempt to look system-wide at university athletic departments — themselves financial entities with annual budgets that are in some cases well into nine figures (Samson, 2013).

An assessment of the entire field of sport communication included information that considered both social media and the unique challenges of intercollegiate athletics. Similar to the present project, a case study approach was utilized to examine the social media strategy of Tennis New Zealand (Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014). Because of the large stakes for entire universities of the success of their athletic programs, and because of the widespread utilization of social media platforms as a marketing and engagement tool by colleges and universities, a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of an athletic department's social media campaigns is warranted. The purpose of this study is to use this system-wide analysis as a case study to help generate a suggested template for athletic departments for utilizing social media.

Old Dominion University

The vehicle through which this template will be generated is a case study of the social media efforts of a single, mid-sized U.S. college athletic department, Norfolk, Virginia's Old Dominion University (ODU). ODU is a mid-sized public university with just over 25,000 students, and an athletic budget of approximately $36 million per year (Minium, 2013). With that budget, ODU competes in 18 sports in the Football Bowl Subdivision of the NCAA. The funds to support Old Dominion University's intercollegiate athletics are derived from a combination of ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, athletic giving, and conference distributions, although the largest proportion (70 percent) is derived from mandatory student fees (Teel, 2014). A bill recently passed by the Virginia state legislature will actually mandate that the university reduce its dependence on student fees to fund its operations to 55% within 10 years (Minium, 2015). Given the myriad financial pressures facing all university athletic departments, there is a steady search for new, affordable tools to provide publicity and marketing, including social media. Old Dominion University, like peer institutions, maintains social media sites to provide exposure to its athletes and coaches, and assist with marketing and public relations efforts.

A place like ODU would not be able to look for guidance in the academic literature about social media and sport. Despite a growing body of scholarship evaluating the efficacy of social media campaigns in all fields, expertise is being generated far more rapidly in the professional, non-peer reviewed literature. Therefore, the authors reviewed best practices for the use of social media in a broad business sense in creating the exploratory framework to evaluate ODU social media efforts, in comparison to peers, and incorporating self- and customer-review feedback.

Theoretical Framework

The rapidly expanding field of social media and sport scholarship currently includes exploration of many different theoretical approaches. A review of more than 125 articles from 29 scholarly journals about social media and sport published since 2008 found 35 different theoretical approaches have been employed by study authors (Abeza et al., 2015). Since this study includes both descriptive quantitative, and qualitative metrics, looks from a practitioner and a consumer perspective, and relies on a framework derived from professional literature, a broader theory such as Social Marketing Theory (SMT) is most applicable.

SMT seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts and approaches to influence behaviors that provide greater-good benefit to individuals and communities. Guided by ethical principles, SMT seeks to integrate research, best practice, theory, and audience insight to inform the delivery of effective, efficient, equitable, and sustainable marketing tactics (International Social Marketing Association, 2013). Francis and Taylor (2009) suggest that SMT is a comprehensive approach of program development encompassing the needs and preferences of the intended audience.

Within academic research, SMT has been used to analyze government intervention programs in alcohol consumption (Kenyon & Wood, 2011), and to test interventions aimed at reducing smoking by bar patrons (Ling, 2014). Its effectiveness has been analyzed through a media lens (Basil, 2012), and scholars have attempted to refresh the theory periodically as new tools have emerged (Leo, 2013). There are criticisms of SMT itself, whether incorporated into social media campaigns, or done as a whole-of-organization examination. Leo (2013) suggests there is little understanding of the behavioral concept in social marketing, suggesting a Social Marketing customer orientation consisting of five key dimensions: fairness and respect, involvement, extension of care, expertise, and authoritative influence.

As a practice-oriented theory, SMT was used to update a website combining nutrition and food-buying education for limited-resource audiences (Francis, Martin, & Taylor, 2011), and to create guidelines for sun exposure among young adults (Johnson, Jones, & Iverson, 2009). SMT at its heart is more cause-focused and public interest-oriented than a commercial marketing effort such as branding and promoting a college athletic department via social media. However, the consideration of customer, the utilization of myriad sources of empirical data and the realization that tactics evolve make it consistent with an academic approach that sits at the nexus of theory and practice, where this study lies.

The Old Dominion University Social Media Landscape

In fall of 2010, ODU Athletics had significant success in its nascent social media efforts. A campaign to nominate and then vote for the ODU mascot as Capital One Mascot of the Year became a cause célèbre among fans. ODU's mascot Big Blue won the nationwide competition, thanks to a concerted effort of online voting through Facebook by members of the University community ("ODU's Big Blue," 2011). The entire enterprise was seen as a stunning success for a school with a mid-sized athletic program, earning media attention and generating spirit and goodwill for the University.

Four years have passed since that campaign galvanized the ODU fan base. ODU Athletics presently conducts myriad social media efforts, maintaining Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest pages, as well as 18 sport-specific Facebook and Twitter pages for varsity sports. The sites use information, pictures, and video from ODU teams to promote attendance at ODU sporting events, inform publics about the efforts of ODU varsity athletes, seek sponsorships, and help foster a sense of community about the school's intercollegiate teams. By analyzing content on the 40 social media pages run by ODU Athletics in comparison to peer institutions, by interviewing practitioners in the department, and by conducting a focus group with ODU fans, the authors propose a list of best practices that could be adopted by similar athletic departments to assist in their use of social media. SMT suggests that marketing efforts draw from all relevant sources to better inform practice, including customer inputs, academic

literature, professional practice, and other sources of ethical, empirically-grounded data (Leo, 2013). Within that framework, the following research questions will guide this study:

>*RQ1*: Through practitioner interviews, content analysis of social media sites, and a focus group with dedicated fans, what can the social media practices of ODU Athletics suggest about the development of effective social media strategy?

>*RQ2*: How can this information be synthesized into the generation of best practices for social media in college and university athletic departments nationwide?

Review of Literature

Social Media as an Organizational Tool

Facebook is a social networking service (SNS) used primarily to connect, interact, and stay in touch with contacts that the user knows personally, such as friends, family and colleagues (Marinucci, 2010). The world's most popular social media site, it now boasts more than 1.2 billion users (McDuling, 2014). Twitter is a microblogging site that has more than 300 million active monthly users posting more than 400 million short messages — known as tweets — every day (Murthy, 2013). Given the immense and growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter, there is a rapidly growing body of scholarship about social media. This research focuses largely on these twin giants of the social media landscape. Scholarship includes many studies of the effectiveness of social media to reach program goals as diverse as information sharing, marketing, and the development of social capital (Eisenberg, Johnson, & Pieterson, 2015; King, 2015; Mandviwalla, & Watson, 2014; Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012).

Social Media Best Practices

If social media is a relatively new field, the field of evaluation of social media efforts is even younger. Thus, we have very little evidence-based guidance on what constitutes best practices for social media campaigns. In looking at the social media efforts of the charitable Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Gibbons (2012) asked, "What exactly do we expect out of social media and how do we know social media will achieve 'something better?'" (p. 1). Even asking these questions put that Foundation ahead of many organizations in evaluating their social media efforts. This blind faith in social media was reflected in the results from a survey of 5,000 professionals commissioned by the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, which found that though nearly 60 percent of individuals felt social media was providing a strong return on investment, only 32 percent have goals and objectives for their social media campaigns and only 35.9 percent do any type of tracking of the impact of their social media efforts (Cici, 2011).

There exists some empirical research concerning the effectiveness of social media practice, but this body of scholarship includes few quantitative measures. A 2012 survey of U.S. companies' social media marketing efforts found that 57 percent of them collected social media metrics — quantitative tabulations of social media engagement — no deeper than counting their number of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, and their time spent on social pages, and qualitatively analyzing their user-generated content (Funk, 2013). That type of surface analysis is also commonplace in the academic field of program evaluation. Evaluators of social media

influences on food safety programs (James et al., 2013), sales forces (Groza et al., 2012), and smoking-cessation programs (Mahoney et al., 2014) do little more than collect descriptive information concerning number of followers.

In sport, Miranda, Chamorro, Rubio, and Rodriguez (2014) conducted a comparative study of professional teams' use of Facebook, using an assessment index to determine effectiveness. A study of sport fans of college teams assessed how they responded to particular types of Facebook posts (Hodge et al., 2015). The authors note: "The amount a firm's post is liked, commented on, shared, or RSVPed to is an easily quantifiable measure of the content's dissemination and willingness of followers to potentially attend an event" (p. 277).

Although there is no set of verified best practices that have grown out of research, Funk (2013) attempts to capture some popular practices in *Advanced Social Media Marketing*. One of countless non-peer reviewed professional publications about effective social media use, the book covers a broad spectrum of social media platforms, principles and strategies. Funk argues the three vital ingredients of social media practice have emerged from the popular literature which are awareness, personality and relationship. The suggestions mirror what many others in social media practice are saying, such as Flynn (2012), Brogan (2010), and Blanchard (2011). Peer-reviewed practitioner recommendations are less common, but have been done for utilities (Elefant, 2011), health care (McCaughey et al., 2014), and nonprofits (Chapman, Miller-Stevens, Morris, & O'Hallarn, 2015). Following a survey of 262 employees of large companies and organizations, Jennings, Blount, and Weatherly (2014) suggest a range of options for companies to consider in terms of social media policies, because of the potential legal and bottom-line impact of employees' individual social media use.

There have been recent studies of social media effectiveness that have attempted to go further. An examination of food and health organizations' interactive communication with the public found that the organizations have used social media to find out more about their clients (Shan et al., 2015). Richter, Muhlestein, and Wilks (2014) explored how hospitals use social media and suggest benefits of increased revenue, employee recruitment and increased customer satisfaction through their effective use.

In *Advanced Social Media Marketing*, Funk (2013) suggests several things companies and organizations can do to take advantage of this evolving communication channel including (a) pursue and cultivate 'influentials' — social media users with an outsized following of their own (p. 25); (b) be fun and engaging so social media followers bring the brand into a 'circle of friendship' (p. 38); (c) be 'attuned to public sentiment' to address complaints (p. 143); and (d) rely on quantitative analysis of social media engagement, known as analytics, to take the 'pulse and vital signs' of social media efforts (p. 153). In this paper, we use Funk's list of four common practices as a framework to guide the investigation.

Social Media and University Sport

With the pressure to compete in every venue, college and university athletic departments feel intense pressure to deploy social media efforts (Talty, 2011). They are forced to be tactical about platform and outcome (Metscher & Steele, 2013). Ferrazzi and Raz (2010) argue that social media interactions need to be grounded in four principles: generosity, vulnerability, candor, and accountability. Proponents of social media suggest adhering to such principles can help increase engagement (Tomko, 2011) and sell tickets (Steinbach, 2010), a claim that has so far proven difficult to demonstrate empirically (Popp & McEvoy, 2014). College athletics

departments are struggling to manage and leverage the department's social media presence as part of day-to-day business operations, according to a 2014 national survey of sport information directors (Syme & Dosh, 2014). Plus, widespread adoption of social media, including by student-athletes, exposes the athletic department to new risks from thoughtless or hateful posts by stakeholders (Meriwether, 2014).

In examinations of social media use for university sport research, social media policies of university athletic departments have been studied (Sanderson, 2011), content analyses have been conducted of athletic department pages (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011), and the relationship student-athletes and their followers share on Twitter has been examined (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). There has been little academic study on the effectiveness of social media campaigns. Hipke and Hachtmann (2014) conducted case study interviews of Big Ten athletic conference officials, finding that social media strategies at the schools were being driven through athletic communication departments, rather than marketing departments. Jensen, Ervin, and Dittmore (2014) assessed the influence of football coaches on Twitter to leverage that popularity for entire athletic departments. While many university athletic marketing directors feel they are effective at designing and evaluating social media marketing campaigns (Martin, Miller, Elsisi, Bowers, & Hall, 2011), Popp and McEvoy (2014) found that university athletic departments have so far been unable to leverage their investment in social media campaigns into financial return.

In the past few years, researchers have attempted to gain further knowledge about what works in high-pressure efforts to turn social media efforts into financial and public relations return for colleges and universities. The studies have included content analysis of social media efforts (Dixon et al., 2015; Hodge et al., 2015), practitioner-focused research (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013), and assessed the state of knowledge in the discipline (Abeza et al., 2015). This study is an attempt to fuse the different research threads into an operational best practice template.

The purpose of this study is to rely on case study analysis of a university athletic department, including practitioner interviews, a fan feedback focus group and content analysis to provide a focused strategy for athletic departments for utilizing social media, so that relatively scarce social media resources are utilized in the most effective fashion. Using Funk's four recommendations for social media for business as a point of departure, we expand this framework to incorporate the unique nature of university athletics.

Method

Case-studies involve in-depth examination of a bounded site (Yin, 2014). The case study of Old Dominion University social media efforts involved a multi-pronged design (Stake, 1995) that triangulated qualitative data for a credible analysis (Hays & Singh, 2011; Miles & Huberman 1994). We interviewed social media practitioners as well as fans, and conducted a content analysis of the 40 social media sites run by ODU Athletics. We also examined social media at five peer institutions through content analyses of their athletic websites and social media linkages.

Participants

To gain a holistic view of the ODU social media effort, all six ODU Athletics social media practitioners were interviewed individually. All six perform social media duties along with their regular job. Participants were interviewed using researcher-developed, semi-structured interview protocols. The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting, with the semi-structured question lines guiding the subject inquiry. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis by researchers. Subjects have been de-identified in results reported so that confidentiality is maintained. Questions asked of the practitioners focused on their actions about social media posts, and about their engagement with fans, including: (a) which of ODU Athletics' social media sites are you charged with administering?; (b) how frequently do your posts include a "call to action," such as an opportunity to win or buy merchandise or tickets?; and (c) how frequently do you engage with Facebook friends or Twitter or Instagram followers in your social media posts?

In addition, a focus group of fans of ODU Athletics was conducted. Fans were invited to the focus group while attending a fan event with Old Dominion coaches in the athletic offseason. The three male and one female supporters, ranging in ages from 35 to 60, characterize themselves as big fans of ODU, having cheered for its teams for 10 years or more. Included in the questions asked to focus group members were: (a) in your experience, which of the ODU Athletics social media sites is the best, and why?; (b) what is the single best thing you have seen ODU Athletics do via social media; and (c) what things are done by other sport organizations that you think Old Dominion could adopt into its practices? Finally, a supremely enthusiastic social media user, who sends thousands of tweets per year about ODU teams to his nearly 1,500 followers, was interviewed as an expert, or "maven," about what strengths and weaknesses exist in the school's social media efforts. This fan was identified by the researchers through in-depth social media engagement with ODU, particularly on Twitter.

Social Media Sites

Content of 40 social media sites administered by ODU athletics were analyzed for the month of July 2014, with author observations compared against social media industry best practices specified by Funk (2013). A tally of friends and followers of each page was compiled, and compared against a similar table that had been produced by the athletic department 10 months earlier. Every post from that month was examined from a descriptive standpoint (number of posts, which of those posts used pictures or graphics, and levels of interactivity by ODU Athletics and by followers of the pages). Review of academic and professional literature, especially Funk, provided the researchers a roadmap of what to look for in the posts, and made clear what was lacking, and how each post on the Old Dominion social media pages was hitting Funk's benchmarks of pursing influentials, being fun and engaging, and being attuned to public sentiment.

As a final step, five peer institutions' social media sites were analyzed for the same time interval to compare levels of friend and follower counts, interactivity, and originality of content. The schools were chosen due to similar-sized athletic budgets (all five schools), current (two institutions) or former (two institutions) conference affiliation, and geographic proximity (all five schools). The five peer institutions were selected for a similar content analysis of posts, grounded in Funk's best practices. The analysis was less systematic than the entry-by-entry examination of

ODU's 40 social media pages, but since it was helping build a best-practice template, provided ample evidence of social media practices that could be employed by ODU, which turned out to be the first recommendation of the best-practice template we generated.

Measures

Using Funk's (2013) four suggestions for social media campaigns, we created interview protocols for the social media practitioners, fans, and a super-fan of ODU Athletics. Three experts in communication and social media examined the interview protocols. The final protocols were used to test ODU Athletics social media practice against the best practices outlined in the Funk framework for social media campaigns. Since the questions were aimed at every practitioner in the department, they focused on their individual actions, rather than the outcome of their social media activities, such as selling more tickets. The social media marketing practitioners at the university reside in the sports information office, and are not directly responsible for sales.

Analysis

Following transcription of the interviews, the data were analyzed and coded by two of the researchers, seeking emergent themes consistent with constant comparative methodology of axial coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data from the interviews and content analyses were synthesized so that dominant themes could appear. Through consensus coding, and using the third researcher as an auditor, five themes emerged. These themes were then compiled into a list of recommendations with supporting evidence. ODU Athletics officials who were interviewed for the study had an opportunity to raise concerns about the accuracy and validity of their responses. Though the evaluation was conducted independently, initial recommendations about best practices were presented to ODU Athletics in August 2014.

Reiteration

Since case studies are an iterative process, where the data informs further inquiry (Yin, 2014), and heeding the suggestion of social media researchers to reinvestigate sites to view changes over time (Abeza, O'Reilly & Reid, 2013), the researchers felt revisiting the recommendations of the social media evaluation with the lead practitioner of ODU Athletics would add depth to the study. Six months after the presentation of the evaluation findings, the lead practitioner charged with executing the social media strategy for the school's athletic department was interviewed again. The individual was asked specifically about the five recommendations that were presented by the researchers. This time interval allowed for further self-assessment and reflection by ODU Athletics, and an opportunity to implement social media protocol changes. The individual was asked specifically about the five recommendations presented to the department by the researchers, to see which had gained currency in the actions of athletics staff doing social media.

Results

Based on the information gleaned from interviews, industry best practices and qualitative observations of the ODU Athletics social media sites as well as those of peer institutions, the evaluators offer five recommendations to university athletic departments who are implementing a social media campaign. They are given the acronym **S-T-E-A-M**, with each letter symbolizing a recommendation for the sites including: Steal, Team, Engagement, Analytics and Mavens. These recommendations expand Funk's (2013) business-oriented social media practice to the unique arena of university athletics.

STEAL

According to Wang and Zhou (2014, p. 144), "sport organizations should learn from each other and explore the most effective way to operate their Twitter sites." Such thinking can be explained through the concept of mimetic isomorphism, which is rooted in institutional theory and posits that organizations may be inclined to mimic the actions of similar others, especially when faced with ambiguous goals (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Such isomorphic behavior has been found to be common within the realm of intercollegiate athletics (Ward, 2015).

Most university athletic departments do not have extensive social media staff, although there is a growing trend to have dedicated social media specialists, particularly at larger universities. At ODU, six employees do the bulk of the posting and interaction on the Athletics social media sites, either directly, or by supervising student interns. A handful of coaches of ODU teams are the only other individuals who act as site administrators, and their social media work consists of solely Facebook and Twitter posts for their particular sport. This past school year, for the first time, a committee was involved in putting a strategy in place for social media.

> Honestly, in this last year, it's the first year we've actually organized our social media program. This is the first year we've really taken a look at our followers, who is going to be assigned to what… and we're actually looking at hiring an intern to be in charge of game day social media. That's the first time we've organized it in any way. Otherwise it was kind of haphazard. (Practitioner 1)

In interviews with the six practitioners, there was a uniform wish for more time and/or resources for social media. The lack of an organized system internally was cited as eating up resources, "There's no protocol. You spend all this time doing it and there's no one telling you if it's right or wrong" (Practitioner 4).

An efficient way to leverage resources is to STEAL ideas from other schools. A simple survey of five peer institutions demonstrated that there were good ideas at similar schools in similar markets. An example includes the use of a single, catchy Twitter hashtag to brand all athletic department communication, including use of imagery that ties back to the school mascot (#UNDAUNTED) for the East Carolina Pirates. Another university, Middle Tennessee State, capitalized on 100 years of football history at the school with a multimedia, cross-platform social media campaign leading up to football season. Two of the ODU practitioners did mention they frequently look to other schools to see what ideas can be co-opted because of the stress on their resources. Good ideas can come from any source.

However, Thompson et al. (2014) caution against blindly implementing tactics that have been successful in other social media strategies. We agree, as it is important to understand how the fans of one particular sport organization may react differently from the fans of another organization. Therefore, we recommend assigning a staff member or intern to *spend time looking at different social media sites, finding appropriate ideas to consider for adoption.*

TEAM

While social media sites serve a role in promotion and engagement between fans and organizations, one of the primary goals of university athletics social media is to get fans to buy tickets to events, as well as support athletic teams and foundations (Hipke & Hachtmann, 2014). The clear branding of the efforts as one team is the goal, but this is easier said than done. One common conundrum has to do with the balance of providing both sport-specific outlets and university sport portals. At ODU, each of the 18 sports has an individual website. With sport-specific Facebook and Twitter feeds, this amounts to 40 separate social media outlets to maintain by just six practitioners. However, just providing one omnibus athletic page can be frustrating to fans who want specific information about one sport and not others. At a peer institution that has more than four times the Facebook friends and more than three times the Twitter followers of Old Dominion, there is no separate Facebook or Twitter page for individual sports, including its flagship program, men's basketball.

Likewise, branding teams versus the university organization causes tension. At ODU, each Twitter post uses #ODUSports as its cross-brand hashtag, as well as #ODU(sport initials) for each individual sport. This double branding sends a mixed message and the retweet is less likely with the two hashtags (Funk, 2013), and uses up more of the 140-character tweet. Virginia Commonwealth University limits the branding confusion by using only the hashtag to #LetsGoVCU. Special events such as the posting of fan pictures from around the world is given a different hashtag (#TravelingRams) that is specific to the event, short lived and not cross-branded with the central branding hashtag.

The idea of branding is a foundational aspect of integrated marketing communication plans and is a carryover from traditional marketing activities such as advertising and sales promotion. Such a consistency of messaging is vital to brand building and developing long-term relationships (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2014) suggest that digital strategies like social media should be integrated into communication and marketing plans, as it provides a platform to build the brand with an online audience while maintaining direct control of the brand image. Through relationship marketing, athletic departments can take steps toward long-term customer cultivation rather than relying on short-term revenue production (Abeza et al., 2013).

Clarity of brand and message cannot be overemphasized. With so many social media sites administered by ODU Athletics, a post announcing the creation of ODU's Pinterest account appeared on every Facebook and Twitter feed. This results in the feeling that information on ODU sites was programmatic because of the high level of repetition through separate social media outlets, and could result in message fatigue for a fan that followed multiple ODU Athletics sites.

One challenge identified by athletic social media practitioners is the line of demarcation between individual athletes' social media pages and the official athletic sites. Like many other

athletic departments, the ODU department has a strict policy not to link to student-athletes' Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.

> We do monitor their social media pages. Even though we have that supervision over them, we cannot stop them from what they post on them. We have found it's important, especially from the standpoint of pictures, not to direct any of our fan base to that, as well as media. (Practitioner 2)

The department also provides instruction to student-athletes about what is and isn't appropriate on social media sites. "It's a little shock value in some respects, but that's OK. I think you need to use shock value to show how social media can come back and bite you," Practitioner 1 said. The ODU football team forbids student athletes from even having Twitter accounts (a policy that has recently been rescinded). "I think it helps us, but that's probably a very narrow-minded view, because I'm older. It allows us to control the message, rather than 104 football players tweeting things," said Practitioner 3. The distance from players' social media presence may make good sense from a legal perspective, but it is not what fans want in terms of feeling close to the team and engaged. As we will discuss under Engagement, fans want to feel like they are privy to private and tantalizing details that have to do with team members. Shutting down player communication distances fans from the team brand.

Athletic departments have to be mindful of NCAA compliance issues when it comes to social media. Staff and interns are informed that they cannot reference student athletes in any way if they have not signed a national letter of intent at Old Dominion University.

> We'll have recruits at games, and they'll tweet a photo, "Great atmosphere at the game," and I'll look at the photo and be ready to retweet it and look at the name ... 18-year-old high school student. I can't retweet that. (Practitioner 2)

The bottom line is that ***building team recognition and fan base comes at a cost if not done in an efficient manner.*** Also, branding efforts have to stay within university and NCAA guidelines.

ENGAGEMENT

Mullin, Hardy and Sutton's (2007) Attendance/Participation Frequency Escalator suggests it is far easier to move existing customers up the ladder of engagement than to create new ones. However, in-depth engagement is time-consuming and can cause problems, such as Florida State's #AskJameis hashtag (Florio, 2014). At its root, the process begins with getting fans to put their eyes on athletic content. As such, ODU practitioners are making a concerted effort to incorporate pictures and more recently, video, into as many tweets and Facebook posts as possible. "People don't pay attention very long. A 10- to 15-second clip of the team running out of the tunnel … people love that," Practitioner 2 said.

"A requirement or expectation is that our social media posts include pictures or videos 100 percent of the time, because just words may not catch the eye," said Practitioner 1. Accelerating the process of engagement is where ODU Athletics falls down. In a review of a month of social media posts by ODU Athletics, it appears there is basically zero engagement that Funk (2013) suggests helps bring fans into the 'circle of friendship.'

Retweeting fan posts is the one way most athletics social media practitioners engage with the school's social media followers. One of the practitioners said they like to do it, but they are frequently prevented by time constraints. Others in the department avoid engaging with fans who post on the sites. "This isn't a chat room we're running," Practitioner 5 said. This, in our view, represents a significant missed opportunity. The next level of inclusion often comes with interaction on Facebook or comments on websites. This may be as simple as "liking" a picture of a fan's dressed-up dog (an opportunity passed up by ODU).

Fans of Old Dominion University Athletics stressed the desire for engagement, over and over, during a focus group conducted by the researchers. Four individuals who had been fans of the university's teams for at least 10 years each gathered at a fan function to share their insight about what they needed and wanted from ODU through social media. Their critique of current social media efforts was quite pointed. The individuals mentioned that they were generally pleased with the amount of news content they received about ODU Athletics through social media. However, Fan 2 noted:

> Generally speaking, I'm not convinced that that is the purpose of social media. Social media is to interact with this whole network of folks. I think Athletics would find that people would get more involved in social media if there was a personality behind the social media page, rather than just, "Here's more information."

Another of the focus group participants decried the lack of information beyond surface facts about the teams being provided by ODU:

> I don't think teams or the Athletic department understand the hunger of knowledge of what they might deem minutia. I learned through (the local newspaper) that the basketball team had a fantastic elite camp. I was excited to get it from the (local paper), and I'm dumbfounded why the basketball team wouldn't put it out. (Fan 4)

This is a great example of uses and gratifications theory in action, which suggests that the individual has control over the media by exercising their personal choice in search of messaging that will satisfy their needs (Katz, Blumer, and Guevitch, 1974; West & Turner, 2010). In this case, the ODU Athletic department was not providing the fan with information he desired, yet he was able to gain the type of information he was seeking through another media outlet. This suggests that the ODU athletic department needs to be more in tune with the social media expectations of its constituents, if nothing else to mitigate against the risk of fans taking their discretionary time and money elsewhere. It is not only knowledge that these fans seek, however, but also interactivity through an exchange of messaging and socialization (Jensen, 1998; Chung & Yoo, 2006).

Fan 1 added: "I don't think they do a very good job actually interacting with fans, having a personality behind the athletic department." Suggestions made for creating more interaction by all focus group participants included the use of Twitter or Facebook for "chats," something done by the local newspaper, and co-opting simple engagement ideas like the Trivia Thursday contests run weekly by the school's athletic foundation. Focus group fans agreed that ODU Athletics doesn't do an adequate job understanding its fans. Fan 4 said:

> I don't think they capture their fan base. Did anyone here tonight (at the fan event) get asked for Facebook accounts, Twitter accounts? Have you ever been asked for a Twitter account, Facebook account or email in the [Donor] Room when it's overflowing with people? … I think they've missed a huge segment of the market by simply not asking for it.

Participants used the focus group as an impromptu brainstorming session about how ODU Athletics could more effectively connect with its fans. Fan 2 noted that these are already supporters of the school's teams; they don't need recruitment, they need connection. "This is our intimate setting."

This recommendation of engagement champions relationship building and enhancing interaction, which are central tenets of relationship marketing (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Such relationship marketing strategies are important to sport organizations, as relationship quality has been found to influence fan behavior in terms of media consumption, purchase intentions, and game attendance (Kim, 2008), which is a social media goal for intercollegiate athletic departments (Dixon et al., 2015).

In that spirit, the researchers urge that *social media sites be used as an "intimate setting" for fans of the team,* where familiarity with the teams and players, along with the humanity and personality of social media practitioners, can lead to greater connection to the athletic department and the university.

ANALYTICS

For the past two years, ODU Athletics has conducted counts of Facebook friends and Twitter followers for its 40 pages. At the time this social media evaluation was done, the researchers tabulated the increase in friends and followers in the 10 months since the last time the department had done its own tally. In general, Facebook is a more popular social media site than Twitter for fans of ODU Athletics, though the department gained Twitter followers at twice the rate it garnered Facebook friends. The increase in Twitter followers was notable in a few sports where ODU qualified for NCAA championship tournaments, such as men's soccer, field hockey, and baseball. Baseball in particular gained more than 500 Twitter followers since April, and in spring 2014 played in its first NCAA tournament in more than 10 years.

Among the sports having success cultivating friends and followers, wrestling stands out. Given its modest profile, it is notable that wrestling has almost as many Facebook friends as men's and women's basketball combined. Men's basketball saw the largest percentage increase of any site (more than doubling its number of Facebook friends) but the team also won 18 games in 2013-14, as opposed to five the previous year. Baseball appears to be gaining rapidly on both Facebook and Twitter (possibly accompanying success). Facebook serves a different population, and a different function, for social media audiences. Facebook is a more visual medium, and better lends itself to campaign-style promotional posts. That could explain the sheer number of Facebook friends for the ODU Football page, more than double the number for Athletics main Facebook page.

Also an important part of relationship marketing, athletic departments should seek to have a better understanding of who its fans are (Abeza et al., 2013). Despite the need to collect and analyze data to evaluate goal attainment and assess value (Williams & Chinn, 2010), it is

important to note that at the time of the evaluation, ODU Athletics was doing little more than counting friends and followers on social media. However, Thompson et al. (2014) argue that content quality trumps the quantitative counts of friends and followers when it comes to evaluating social media effectiveness.

So much more information is available about the reach and impact of social media posts for free, through Facebook and Twitter's own analytics programs, as well as Google analytics. Knowing which posts are popular, who likes them, who is interacting the most, and other information is invaluable for making decisions about what fans want on social media. Even using the analytic tools provided free of charge by the social media sites can show which posts have the most reach and impact. Therefore, we recommend ***using analytics to constantly tweak and adjust what is being posted, so the fans are getting what they want.***

MAVENS

Social media has provided a new way for passionate fans of Old Dominion University to reach out. It also provides a record of who they are. These ODU "super-fans" or mavens, can be evangelists, particularly if the department seeks them out and enlists their help. As identified by Williams and Chinn (2010) in their explanation of the value of prosumers, mavens are those who are "recognized third-party influencers, tastemakers, champions" (p. 428). Thus, the identification of such influential fans can be an effective component for a department's relationship marketing efforts (Abeza et al., 2013), especially as these mavens generate content that is viewed by their peers as recommendations (Williams & Chinn, 2010). This could create an opportunity for athletic department social media efforts and the work of mavens to not only co-exist, but become somewhat connected.

Therefore, as a final step for this portion of the evaluation, an enthusiastic supporter of Old Dominion University Athletics, who tweets frequently about many different sports, was interviewed. Known by different names in the social media industry — enthusiasts; early adopters; mavens — these individuals can play a significant role in helping any organization tell its story. In this individual's viewpoint, the social media work done by ODU Athletics is inconsistent.

Like other observers, both in and outside the athletic department, this individual doesn't detect a comprehensive social media plan by ODU Athletics. "Right now it's kind of the wing it or fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants method," the maven said. There is inconsistency of message and branding, and the department misses many opportunities to engage with fans when questions are asked via social media, the enthusiast said. As advice to the department, the individual urged ODU Athletics to provide access through social media to things the public usually can't see, such as behind-the-scenes snippets before and after games, or public events where ODU's student-athletes can be better seen as real people. He added:

> I always like to compare social media to salt and pepper. It's seasonings. It's
> going to season up the dish; it's not going to make the dish. You don't buy salt
> and pepper when you go to the restaurant, but it makes what you get better.

Although researchers have cautioned about the lack of content control in user-generated social media marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Abeza et al., 2013), a strategic plan to integrate positive, influential mavens in social media platforms is a way

for sport managers to mitigate against such risks. Therefore, we recommend that ODU social media staff review social media posts and analytics to ***find out who their most passionate fans are, and seek out their support, to use their reach and followers to extend the marketing appeal of ODU Athletics through social networks.***

Six Months Later

The interview with the lead practitioner of social media efforts for ODU Athletics focused specifically on the recommendations that had been made to the department by researchers the previous summer. This individual, charged with executing the entire social media strategy for the department, was asked specifically about progress on the five researcher recommendations. With regards to stealing others' ideas, marketing the team as a single entity, and engaging consumers who follow ODU on social media, the practitioner said progress has been made. Ideas that have been put into operation by other schools — such as celebrity guest "tweeters" for specific events, and the creation of a site that collected social media posts by fans and displayed them, called a Storify, connected to a Friday night home football game. "We are definitely looking at best practices," the practitioner said.

With regards to branding ODU with a consistent "team" approach, the practitioner said the addition of a part-time, dedicated social media manager for ODU Athletics has helped with consistency of social media posts. The practitioner added that the hiring of a dedicated social media employee has been greeted positively, according to anecdotal feedback gathered from independent fan message boards. "I started to see some things. 'Hey, has Athletics hired someone to work full time in social media? Hey, if they did, that's a great move.'" The addition of this staff member is consistent with the positive outcomes espoused by sport marketing researchers (Dixon et al., 2015).

The third recommendation, to engage more with people posting on Old Dominion's social media pages, had also been tackled to a limited degree, the practitioner said. "We've seen the number of folks who understand that they can answer a question and get a response increase. And maybe it's the folks who weren't answering before." The practitioner added that ODU Athletics has noticed an increased level of engagement between followers. "We've seen people that, if we post something, they'll share it with four or five friends almost immediately," the practitioner said.

That is the final recommendation that was presented to ODU Athletics six months earlier — to activate the network of motivated social media followers, known as mavens. The practitioner said that from their end, there has not been an effort to pinpoint who these motivated social media posters are, and to reach out to them:

> We haven't catalogued who those folks are, and if there's an easy way to do that, but that could be something we look at down the road, especially if we could identify who those folks are. Obviously, we can if we took the time to do it, and that's probably why we're not doing it, because we haven't taken the time and I haven't given the directive to do it. I'm just making sure that operationally we keep up with what I'm asking us to do. But that's probably the logical next step. This represents a significant opportunity not being pursued presently by ODU Athletics.

The final suggestion from the evaluators was to analyze the reach of tweets and Facebook posts through the use of analytics. The practitioner mentioned that the extent of the department's use of analytic tools is to count Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Discussion

University athletic departments are struggling with ever-increasing cost demands, and a growing chorus of critics that suggest the entire enterprise is financially unsustainable (Sparvero & Warner, 2013; Sander, 2011). Social media has been suggested as a low-cost alternative to expensive marketing and advertising campaigns to promote collegiate athletics, and in turn, universities themselves (Dittmore et al., 2013; Hipke & Hachtmann, 2014). However, the no-cost aspect of social media platforms may help suggest why their use has not been matched by investment in tools to determine return-on-investment for the time spent doing social media. There is no shortage of self-proclaimed social media experts seeking to offer marketing solutions to cash-strapped entities, but peer-reviewed, best practice academic literature has failed to keep pace in any discipline, not just in sport.

This report was not intended to be a forensic examination of Old Dominion University's social media practices. However, an empirical analysis of ODU from multiple vantage points, grounded in Funk's (2013) framework, and incorporating customer-focused, public service-oriented Social Marketing Theory, can be a useful addition to sport and social media literature. The ubiquity of these campaigns, and the similarity of their measured objectives, suggest that best practice guidelines can have applicability to a broad range of sectors. Using Funk's (2013) industry guidelines for social media campaign construction, we modify this framework to meet the needs of the university athletic community.

The S-T-E-A-M framework (Steal, Team, Engagement, Analytics, and Mavens) offers attention to athletic-specific issues. Steal addresses the dearth of resources most university athletic departments face. Team acknowledges that at the very base of this effort is the branding and marketing of athletic teams — within the constraints of higher education and NCAA regulations. Engagement seeks to impress the importance of creating the 'circle of friends' with fans and other athletic stakeholders. Analytics refers to the need to dig deeper into the data available from social media sites to track effectiveness. And Mavens introduces the idea of 'influencers' to university sports. These under-utilized super-fans expand the resource base of university athletic departments.

We provide a general template for social media efforts for university athletic departments but make no claims that the findings from this case study are generalizable. However, even standalone observations of social media efforts by a single university can provide further guidance to social media practitioners seeking eagerly to find the best-possible use of this new marketing and communication tool. Researcher Chad McEvoy describes social media as being like television in the 1940s or 50s. Advertisers were still figuring out that new medium, and trying different approaches to find one that worked best (Popp & McEvoy, 2014). An analysis such as this could inspire other studies, which can help further figure out how best to use this new technology.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

It is important to recognize that a case study is not intended to provide a one-size-fits-all solution to the dilemma of effective social media marketing and engagement. While elements of the study and the S-T-E-A-M framework could apply across many disciplines, this is not intended to be a generalizable study — every organization has different and evolving needs. Within the parameters of the study itself, there are also possible limitations from the time when information was obtained from the ODU websites (summer, the typical athletic offseason) and the potential for social media practitioners to attempt to color their efforts in the best-possible light. The focus group drew from only the most dedicated fans, so their views would not typically reflect the broader community. Finally, social media technology evolves so rapidly, there is a chance that the social media sites used in this study will be supplanted by new, more popular platforms before too long.

The study does, however, afford numerous avenues of entry to further research. A cross-university comparison utilizing this framework could be informative, and so would a study that is more longitudinal in nature, covering social media innovation over a longer period of time. As well, there is a possibility of quasi-experimental treatments, focused on what customers say they want from ODU (or any organization via social media) and what they actually receive. In particular, motivated social media users, who we call mavens, are an under-studied phenomenon. More insight into why mavens invest so heavily of their time and effort evangelizing on behalf of a particular cause or organization might unlock cues for social media managers to better utilize material that better inspires these followers to spread the word.

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