

SPORTS EVENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

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Abstract

Sport marketing is the specific application of marketing principles and processes to sports products and services. In 2014 the biggest sports event in the world, the FIFA World Cup, took place in Brazil. Billions of spectators around the world saw Germany win the trophy in Rio de Janeiro for the fourth time in history. Yet unlike in previous World Cups, conversation was not only taking place at the numerous public viewings which were held in open spaces like bars and restaurants. For the entire tournament social media like Facebook or Twitter were playing a dominant role in all aspects. With 672 million tweets on Twitter and three billion conversations on Facebook, this was the most social World Cup as well as the most social mega sports event so far. It did not matter whether it were users, athletes or companies, everyone was trying to catch up on the conversation to be informed or inform others about their opinion or latest news. This paper analyzes the implementation of social media marketing during mega sports events with a focus on adidas' and Nike's social media campaigns in the frame of the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil. The analysis shows that social media marketing in the frame of mega sports events gains importance. Those companies finding topics that affect people personally with a relationship to their products achieve success through social media marketing.

Keywords: Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Sports Events, Sport Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past decade the rapid proliferation and widespread adoption of social media for marketing purposes can be observed across all technological and digital touch points. With social media enjoying high attention and conversation rates, companies try to benefit from the popularity of mega sports events as well. Within a very short time period they can quickly reach a large community to spread their message using the positive attitude and energy generated by

the event (Nufer & Ibele, 2015). The two largest companies in the sports industry, adidas and Nike, continued their ongoing rivalry on these platforms during the FIFA World Cup 2014. Both had launched globally reaching marketing campaigns in order to once again demonstrate the public who the real leader in the sports goods industry is.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MODERN LIFE

The revolution of communication through social media

Social media activities across the World Wide Web have been increasing tremendously within the past decade. A comprehensive definition originates from Safko and Brake (2009). They are stating that “social media encompasses all of the interactions between people online – all the ways they participate in and share information, knowledge, and the opinions while using web-based applications to communicate” (Safko & Brake, 2009).

On social networking platforms users primarily connect with people they have some kind of relation with. This leads to generally increased trust users have on the platform and of the shared content by others (Hajli, 2014). As they trust the shared content they are more likely to share positive or negative experience in order to help their peers in making certain decisions. At the same time the feedback of the others is taken into consideration when creating an opinion about a certain product or topic. By considering social media for opinion building the user tries to escape from the information overload he faces everywhere else. Through the trust factor the shared information makes sense and is presented to him on an emotional level. This emotion then converts into logic and makes the user think he made a smart and reasoned decision. As a consequence he will share his experience which in turn helps other users to build an opinion.

Yet, no source of information directly drives the decision process, neither does social media. Today’s consumers do not adhere on a single channel anymore when shopping and therefore they need to be picked up at various touch points. However, social media will play an important role in the future as social networks and blogs are the most visited online destinations in every country, accounting for a high majority of time spent online and reaching at least 60% of active internet users (Vernuccio, 2014).

Social media as a marketing tool

Weinberg (2010) defines social media marketing as “a process that enables people or companies to advertise their websites, products, or services via social media platforms in order to reach a broader community than traditional marketing can”.

The initial goal of social media marketing is to communicate with the target audience, create relationships and listen to their needs through specifically created content. With this

content a company tries to influence and educate its audience in a certain way and establish oneself as thought leader for a specific area of interest. Furthermore it tries to enforce user engagement throughout the published content in order to collect respective data that can be analyzed. However, influence does not always mean inspiring consumers to share the published content or products with others. It can also mean to reduce negatively spread content within different communities (Hettler, 2010).

Yet, the question whether social media is supposed to generate revenue or not is discussed controversially among experts. Besides the difficulty to turn social media into a sales channel, social media marketing enjoys a benefit to other marketing tools by the low costs it provokes. Due to the fact that potential consumers can be targeted much more specifically, the divergence loss is somewhat lower in comparison to traditional channels. Moreover, search engines increasingly take social media into account concerning their rankings. Consequently, an active social media presence might not only benefit the company in terms of customer relationship and feedback but also improves their rank on Google. Particularly for companies operating in the e-commerce business or being dependent on a successful web presence this can serve as an indirect revenue generator (Nufer & Ibele, 2015).

The relevance of Facebook and Twitter

In this paper Facebook and Twitter will be taken into account as they are most relevant and widely used by companies especially those in the sports industry (Witkemper, Lim & Waldburger, 2012).

Facebook

Facebook was founded in 2004 by Marc Zuckerberg, who was a psychology student at Harvard University when he set up the company. He initially intended to create a platform for Harvard students to look up other profiles. The idea caught on and by 2005 it had expanded to all US Ivy-league universities, with thousands of students signing up and creating their own profiles. Today it is the largest social network with 1.3 billion users across the world, and was the first one of its kind to be floated on the stock market (Statista, 2015).

Users create profiles according to their interests and preferences and connect with people they usually have some kind of offline relationship with such as colleagues and school friends. They can then communicate with each other by sharing links, pictures, videos or status updates. Furthermore, it is used to have discussions in groups or to organize events (Safko & Brake, 2009).

Twitter

Twitter was founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and three co-founders for the purpose of sharing short information with other users about their daily life such as what they are doing at the respective moment. Therefore Twitter can be defined as a social publishing service medium being categorized into microblogging platforms. Users are able to create microblogs being limited to 140 characters to share different information with the community. Today it is one of the largest and most relevant networks for companies with more than 284 million monthly active users and 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2015). Furthermore, it is not only used by private users but has also gained high importance for journalism. Sometimes breaking news are published earlier on Twitter than by any newspaper or similar. In 2007 Twitter introduced the hashtag which is now used by most other platforms as well. A hashtag is a term, prefixed by the # symbol that helps people categorize messages in Twitter (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2009). This is particularly helpful for companies as they can more easily sort relevant data for their analysis. With the aid of hashtags they can sort the numerous tweets posted every day by relevancy and find out what users have been talking about.

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN THE FRAME OF MEGA SPORTS EVENTS**The special characteristics of sports and sports events**

Sports touches people and gives them a feeling of affiliation. Football fans for instance show much more passion towards their favorite soccer club than “normal consumers” show towards their favorite brands. Therefore the products, no matter if directly or indirectly related to sports, are more emotional than in any other product category (Nufer, 2014).

Products directly related to sports are mostly merchandising products or events that are promoted by sports clubs or associations (marketing of sports). Products indirectly related to sports use sport's attention to promote the respective products (marketing through sport). Marketing through sports has become particularly relevant for companies during mega sports events. Through different marketing tools they can easily benefit from the global reach and increased attention of consumers and transfer the positive image of the event to their own brand (Bühler & Nufer, 2013).

Due to the global reach mega sports events have, they are the preferred platform for companies to engage in marketing communication. They know that promotional messages can be transmitted to billions of people via multiple communication channels (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006). While sponsorship has been a popularly used marketing tool for years to achieve brand awareness, the implementation of social media campaigns increasingly gains importance for companies as well (MacIntosh, Nadeau, Seguin, O'Reilly, Bradish & Legg, 2012). The

reasoning for this development is very simple: While spectators only watched the matches on TV and discussed them offline until a few years ago, they are now actively participating in social networks sharing opinions with other fans to stay connected and informed about the latest news. Particularly during mega sports events the largest social networks Facebook and Twitter have recorded an enormous increase in user engagement and conversation (Facebook, 2014; Rogers, 2014).

The development of social media marketing during mega sports events

The use of social media during mega sports events is less than ten years old and therefore comparatively new. Mega sports events only take place every two to four year which usually depicts a large digital development in between. While there was no usage of social media during the FIFA World Cup 2002 in Korea first online pages were established for the FIFA World Cup 2006 in Germany. Nike even tried to set up its own online community Joga.com to engage fans in sports and give them the chance to exchange opinions with each other. Yet, the success was not as expected and networks like Facebook and Twitter were still in its beta phase with users mainly from the United States. Within the next four years until 2010 social media made a huge progress and took a central role during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa as well as during the Olympics in Vancouver in 2010. Companies tried to make contact with fans by setting up an account on the relevant networks. Yet, there was no real strategy behind to somehow relate the efforts to the entire business objectives at that time (Sniderman, 2010).

Within the last four years the use of social media has gone through another impressive development. Not only consumers have increased their engagement but also companies have learned from their experiences and have developed intelligent strategies to actually gain benefits from using social media. The latest development which has been observed throughout the last two years is the implementation of real-time communication on different platforms. Companies try to use the attention of an event and center their marketing efforts around to create a viral effect leading to increased brand awareness (Yeoman, 2014). In order to act according to unpredictable situations content is provided months ahead for every single possible scenario (Ruvolo, 2014).

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING DURING THE FIFA WORLD CUP 2014

User activity on Facebook and Twitter during the FIFA World Cup 2014

The FIFA World Cup 2014 has generally been regarded as the most 'social' World Cup to date (Schwartz, 2014). Never in history before an event has been so actively discussed by users and

used by companies as promotional tool. It therefore serves as a suitable case for a detailed research when examining the impact of social media marketing during mega sports events.

No matter on which platform, people being interested in football shared their thoughts and opinions with others during the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil. Particularly Facebook and Twitter hit new records regarding their user activity during the four weeks of the tournament.

Throughout the whole World Cup Twitter recorded 672 million tweets related to the World Cup (Rogers, 2014). With 35.6 million tweets, the Brazil vs Germany Semi-Final game is officially the most-discussed single sports game ever on Twitter (Schwartz, 2014). Regarding athletes, Brazil's Neymar is the most mentioned player on Twitter during the World Cup (Rogers, 2014). The platform also noted it was the real-time moments that drove the most traffic (Lacy, 2014).

When taking a closer look at Facebook, 3 billion interactions were conducted from 350 million users during the four weeks, which makes the World Cup the most discussed sports event ever on the social networking platform (Sellin, 2014). In comparison to Twitter, Facebook recorded the final game as the most talked about sports event with 88 million people generating 280 million interactions, according to numbers from the Facebook data team (Betancourt, 2014).

The social media campaigns of adidas and Nike during the FIFA World Cup 2014

When examining the social media landscape throughout the time before and during the World Cup two sports companies have executed a massive social battle trying to get the most attention by users. While adidas has been in the role of being one of the official FIFA Partners since 1970, Nike has been trying regardless to obtain the public's attention with intelligently created marketing campaigns (Ruvolo, 2014). Furthermore, Nike is trying to replace adidas regarding its market leadership within the football sector. For the first time in history Nike has sponsored more teams than adidas for the past FIFA World Cup (Greeley, 2014).

Adidas

For the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil adidas had developed a special marketing strategy to capture the fans' attention with particular focus on social media and real-time communication. The total costs are estimated at about USD\$ 68 million (Bahrey, 2014) from which a two-digit million amount went into social media (Wirtschaftswoche, 2014). The title "all in or nothing" was supposed to bring across the winning and fighting attitude not only to the players, but also to the fans. Adidas clearly defined the three key objectives that were set for the entire campaign. These were sales, brand promotion and purchase intent, as well as the increased social media-led activation of the brand (Long, 2014). While real-time communication so far mainly focused

on a timely limited event, adidas expanded this concept to the whole four-week tournament of the FIFA World Cup. Social media agencies flew around the globe for over one year capturing different pictures and video material to develop a real-time scenario calendar for every possible outcome of the 32 games (Ruvolo, 2014). Moreover, adidas did not only post content on its official Facebook and Twitter accounts they also created a new account, @brazuca. “Brazuca” is the name of the official match ball of the World Cup, which adidas has provided for every game since 1970 (Thayer, 2014). It was supposed to personalize its tweets and report about every single moment and event happening during the games (Hebben, 2014).

Adidas kicked off its campaign in 2014 on May 24th, three weeks prior to the World Cup starting with a video on YouTube which asked viewers at the end to go “all in” or “nothing” (Bahrey, 2014). Those who chose “all in” signed up automatically for all updates adidas published on Twitter during the World Cup. During the games the social media team at “posto adidas”, the adidas hub in Rio de Janeiro, focused on the conversation with football fans on different platforms. Reactive content was constantly prepared for all possible situations during the games (adidas, 2014).

However, adidas did not only push the brand through its own accounts but also through its players, such as Lionel Messi or Mesut Özil, that have an exclusive contract with adidas. With their large fan communities on Facebook and Twitter the brand could perfectly use them as brand ambassadors to expand the reach of its brand message.

Nike

In comparison to its biggest competitor adidas, Nike usually doesn't participate as much in sponsorships, but rather implements intelligently developed ambush marketing campaigns to obtain the consumer's attention. Ambush marketing is the practice by companies of using their own marketing, particularly marketing communications activities, to give an impression of an association with the event to the event audience, although the companies in question have no legal or only underprivileged or non-exclusive marketing rights for this event sponsored by third parties. Thus, ambushers want to promote and sell products via an association with the event as official sponsors are allowed to do (Nufer, 2013).

For the FIFA World Cup 2014 they tried to gain a competitive advantage by kicking off their campaign in 2014 on April 1st, almost two months prior to adidas. With the leading slogan “risk everything” they started off as well with a video on YouTube featuring top players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, or Neymar Jr. The video demonstrates how the athletes are struggling to demonstrate their performance at the right moment. In addition to that Nike implemented supportive offline activities being related to football and the “risk everything”-

campaign. By organizing indoor football tournaments all across the globe Nike did not only engage its fans online but also in the real world (Bahrey, 2014). Speaking about innovative marketing tools, Nike used a special real-time delivery tool from Google which enabled them to display online advertisements of key scenes within ten seconds. The ads were displayed on Google's Display network in 15 different countries with a large football community. Fans could click on them and create posters with the "Nike phenomenal shot". These pictures could then be shared with friends on various social networking platforms (Lacy, 2014).

There is one thing that Nike did significantly different to all of their competitors: Instead of trying to advertise their merchandising products to push sales, they focused on the promotion of the FIFA World Cup as an event. Tint, an American social media agency, speaks about "the showcase of a sport rather than a product" (Thayer, 2014). Yet, Nike did not leave out the integration of traditional media such as TV. As Zlatan Ibrahimović was not able to join the event as participant with Sweden, Nike used him as animated version to answer several questions and hot topics around the World Cup. The clips were published on ESPN's "SportsCenter" in between the games. Users could post questions with #AskZlatan which were eventually answered in the next video clip (Moossmann, 2014; Hermann, 2014).

Comparing the social media campaigns of adidas and Nike

Looking at the campaign recognition both companies have increased their social media presence. This happened through their own brand but also through the public's attention towards the sponsored teams and players. Athletes enjoy high influence on consumers as they somehow act as ideals whom their fans strive to be. Both companies have utilized this well. The athletes and their teams were the type of pages consumers mostly started to follow throughout the World Cup. It seems that even though the superior messages have been spread across numerous channels and aligned with matching stories (e.g. "The Last Game") they still did not stick to people's heads. What seems however controversial is that more people appear to remember the adidas title by themselves compared to Nike but not when being presented in the list. This might be due to the fact that probands had the chance to guess in this part of the survey. Taking this fact into account one can conclude that Nike's title had a higher brand match than "allin" from adidas. Hence, people identified it even though they eventually did not know about the campaign (Nufer & Ibele, 2015).

Comparing follower rates, adidas performed slightly better than Nike regarding the increase of followers. Few indicators could have led to a better performance through adidas. First of all, they had the edge over Nike to sponsor the two participants of the World Cup final and consequently the winner of the tournament. Furthermore, the Golden Ball, Golden Boot,

and Golden Glove was given to players sponsored by adidas. The Fair Play Award went to Colombia, who is also sponsored by adidas. In comparison to that, Portugal and England, two of the top favored nations sponsored by Nike, already dropped out of the tournament after the group phase. Since they have two of the most valued players in the world, Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney, this was a big setback for Nike. Especially since the entire communication of the riskeverything-campaign was built around them, particularly Cristiano Ronaldo. Another success driver eventually was the content strategy that adidas chose in alignment with its entire presence throughout the World Cup. In an intelligent way they have not only created relevant real-time content that people are interested in. But they have also brought this on a personalized level by creating for instance the @brazuca account on Twitter. It even substituted informational media in some way by always sharing the latest news with its community. Although Nike implemented something similar with its hashtag #AskZlatan, they did not set up an own account for that. Furthermore, they were somehow limited with real-time communication as they were no official sponsor and therefore could not display content linked to FIFA or the World Cup.

Speaking about sales conversion, it is generally hard to measure which channels generated which sales and how they contributed to the overall results. There are different approaches on how to make social media somehow measurable. Adidas and Nike both have not shared particular links or coupons that lead to a page where consumers can buy something. Therefore the correlated ROI is used in order to approximate a tendency towards sales increase through social media. Both brands have been able to increase their revenues through the World Cup. Numbers of adidas from the third quarter 2014 record an increase of 6.13% in revenues to 4.12 billion Euro (adidas, 2014b). As Nike uses a different fiscal year than Adidas, the numbers are not exactly comparable but still give an indication. For the second quarter of the fiscal year 2015 (ended in November 2014) they record higher revenues of 7.4 billion dollars posing an increase of 15% (Nike, 2014).

Discussion

Both Adidas and Nike had implemented a digital strategy rather than a social strategy. The approach they used rather focused on a long-term strategy that goes far beyond the tournament of the FIFA World Cup 2014. With the increased fan community that has been built through utilizing the tournament's attention the companies now have an excellent base from which they can reach their relatively young target group more effectively through social media. A future step could be to start developing a real, more effective social strategy in order to convert this continuing attention into revenue.

Regarding brand preference and awareness the question is whether this campaign really served to change people's mind about brand preference which leads back to the question what really drives brand preference in sports. Adidas and Nike both are well-known global brands that most people have been in touch with for their entire life. The aim of the World Cup campaigns was rather to use social media as brand building tool and once again communicate their respectively strong position in the sports sector to the public. In some perspectives it even seemed as if the goal was to demonstrate who the real leader is in the sports goods industry – adidas or Nike (Nufer & Ibele, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of social media as a marketing tool during mega sports events is still in its early stages. Because of the emotionally charged nature of sports that catches people's interest and affection, social media marketing will gain importance particularly during mega sports events. Those companies finding something that affects people personally to be related to their products will be the ones who achieve success through social media. This direction can be supported by the results of a study conducted by Catalyst (2014) concerning fan engagement. Eight of ten fans are willing to take action when following a brand in terms of conversation, sharing, and buying intention. Therefore the data can also be used to develop customized loyalty programs to tie the consumers closer to the brand.

The question whether social media is supposed to be a source of revenue or not will probably be an ongoing discussion which companies will solve in different ways in the future. Companies' intention is not only to generate revenue through, but also with social media (Capgemini, 2014). While social media do not have such a high influence on transaction yet, social media certainly play a role regarding awareness and choice. Another development to be observed is the use of social media data and its future integration in the innovation processes. Companies are gathering tons of data from consumers through comments and opinion sharing. This valuable feedback from the target audience can carry on the development of new product ideas to consumer's needs (Nufer & Zuch, 2015).

Way forward

In the course of the analysis additional research questions have been identified for further (especially empirical) research:

First of all, the analysis comprised the two most popular and relevant social networks for companies, Facebook and Twitter. However, adidas and Nike did not only spread their content through these networks, but used numerous other ones as well. Especially YouTube is

supposed to have a significant influence. It would be interesting to find out how the results would have differed if all social networks used by adidas and Nike during the FIFA World Cup had been taken into account.

Moreover, future research could examine in detail whether being in the role of an official sponsor (like adidas) or being in the role of an ambusher (like Nike) has a significant influence on the success of social media marketing – and if yes, how exactly.

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