

Professional Sport Clubs and Web 2.0

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Abstract

This paper reviews relevant Internet, business marketing and sport marketing literature to identify two key challenges and opportunities available to professional sport organizations in the new Internet Web 2.0 environment. It also reports on a pilot study about how major professional sport teams are responding to these challenges and opportunities. The pilot study focused on multimedia use and visitor-involvement offerings on websites of several professional clubs in each of four top-tier leagues in North America and England. Several differences among team websites in respect to media offerings and user-engagement experiences were found. These included the findings that some sport organizations are employing various methods to create online communities and are building secondary websites for visitors, while others are not. The results suggest that most teams in the sampled leagues are taking advantage of at least some opportunities for providing media services and user-engagement experiences to website visitors, but they may be missing other such opportunities.

Keywords: Internet, business marketing, sport marketing.

1. Introduction

The Internet and its World Wide Web—the immensely large set of documents, or "Web pages," which can be accessed via the Internet—has become an increasingly expansive and sophisticated global communication medium, able to convey, virtually instantaneously across thousands of miles, products and services which can be distributed electronically (Thomas, 1998). These include information-heavy services such as banking and education; personal and business communications; and images, movies, voice and music. Sport organizations have not been left behind in this communication revolution. For example, innovations have been made in web-based instruction for sport management and administration (Bennett, 2002; Chappelet, 2001).

Since marketing is preeminently an information-based function, the Internet can also serve as an important marketing medium. Its worldwide scope provides sport organizations the opportunity to reach sport consumers throughout the globe at a cost much less than traditional advertising (Delpy & Bosetti, 1998). To develop an effective Web marketing strategy provides both challenge and an opportunity to organizations. Such a strategy consists of the ways in which the organization uses the Internet to market its products and/or brand, thereby complementing and reinforcing the organization's overall marketing strategy. For sport firms as much as other organizations, developing an effective Web marketing strategy is both a challenge and an opportunity. However, Brown (2003) found that in general, sport organizations "have a long way to go" in taking advantage of the Internet as a marketing medium.

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One factor which makes effective Web marketing challenging is the Internet's constantly evolving complexity and capability. This evolution has resulted in what some consider the second generation of the Internet, often called "Web 2.0," which is characterized by multimedia and by increased user involvement. Because these advances allow consumers to be engaged in new ways, it is crucial for companies to become aware of the marketing opportunities they may afford (Aronauer, 2007; Leighton, 2007).

This paper reviews relevant literature about the evolving Internet, identifying and discussing key opportunities of the new Internet environment which professional sport organizations may take advantage of as they define and develop their web marketing strategies. The paper then reports on a pilot study of how professional sport teams in several top-tier leagues have responded on their websites to the opportunities offered by the evolved Internet. In particular, the websites of several professional clubs in England's Premier League of football, England and France's Super League of rugby, North America's National Hockey League and the United States' National Football League were examined to determine which media they have incorporated and what options for visitor involvement have been provided on the website. The various teams' website offerings are compared and discussed. The overall purpose of the pilot study was to make initial inroads into understanding the ways in which top-tier professional sport teams are taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the Web 2.0 environment.

1.1 The Evolving Internet

Because Web pages are interlinked and are generally accessible by computer from anywhere in the world with telephone communication, the Web serves as a global means of connecting individuals and organizations (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). In its infancy, the language used on the Web was mainly restricted to hypertext markup language (HTML) (Day, 2003), and access was generally restricted to connection via telephone modem. As a result, Web pages consisted almost entirely of static text and images, and user interaction was limited.

However, as more powerful languages have developed and broadband access to the Internet has increased, the capacity of Web pages to carry rich media such as audio files, video and television has dramatically increased. At the same time, the more powerful Web has enabled greater user engagement and user empowerment. These two aspects—multimedia and increased user engagement—are key elements in the evolution of Web 2.0 (Leighton, 2007). Together, they provide an increasingly sophisticated, powerful and user-centered medium, one which provides both challenges and opportunities to business organizations, including professional sport organizations.

1.2 Sport Marketing on the New Web

In its infancy, the World Wide Web's marketing aspects were often ignored by sport organizations. The Internet was used by sport firms mainly to provide news and other information to interested consumers (Delpy & Bosetti, 1998; Beech, Chadwick, & Tapp, 2000). However, as the Internet has grown, a rapidly expanding Web audience has developed for marketers in all kinds of business organizations (Pitta & Fowler, 2005), including those centered on sport. Moreover, for professional sport organizations, not only is the Internet audience growing, but the sport industry itself has experienced

tremendous growth recently as fans' enthusiasm for sport has increased worldwide (Kahle, 2007). In the United States alone, the sport industry is estimated to have grown to 350 billion US dollars annually (Shank, 2005). For sport marketers, this global rise in sport interest creates an even larger Web audience to be addressed. Thus many sport organizations have gone from providing information alone on their websites to utilizing the Web as a business tool through establishing e-commerce capabilities and by making Web presence an integral part of the organization's overall marketing mix (Kitchin, 2006).

In regard to both of these marketing aspects, it is crucial for sport organizations to understand the capabilities, limitations and opportunities afforded by the Internet (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2007). For example, in regard to e-commerce, it is incumbent on sport managers to understand the importance of assuring privacy to online purchasers. This is made evident by a three-nation study which showed that consumers' likelihood of buying a product online is inversely related to the perceived risk in doing so (Kuhlmeier & Knight, 2005). In another study, potential online shoppers were found to fall into three groups: risk-averse doubters, open-minded online shoppers and reserved information-seekers (Barnes, Bauer, Neumann & Huber, 2007). Moreover, a third investigation found that privacy concerns among potential online shoppers resulted in personal power-enhancing responses, one of which was refusal to purchase (Wirtz, Lwin, & Williams, 2007). These studies point to the need for sport organizations to develop strategies to assure potential online shoppers that any personal or financial information provided during online purchases will be wholly secure and held strictly confidential.

It is at least equally important for the sport organization to understand the risks, limitations and opportunities associated with how its Web 2.0 presence fits into its overall marketing mix. One main area of interest in the new Web environment is multimedia. It is crucial for sport organizations to understand how current and developing media technologies may affect their sport (O'Reilly & Rahinel, 2006). This includes grasping how new media, such as podcasting and RSS, might be incorporated into the organization's website and how they might contribute to the organization's overall marketing strategy. For example, greater broadband access has made distribution of video highlights a viable new medium for sport consumers to enjoy (Theysohn, 2006).

The phenomenon of user engagement is a second main characteristic of the Web 2.0 environment. This development is evident in the proliferation of user-generated weblogs, videocasts and podcasts (Bannan, 2007), as well as in the growing number of sport fan sites. It is closely associated with the development of new media, which have helped to create a communications paradigm that enables engagement (Leighton, 2007). At the same time, the increasing use of information and communication technologies is fostering consumer empowerment (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). An important illustration of how this increased user engagement and empowerment can affect sport organizations is provided by the popularity of video sharing websites which allow sport fans to upload videos of matches which the fans have recorded. From the website, other interested consumers can then download and view the recordings, even though this use may violate a sport organization's regulations for recording and/or exhibiting visual images of its matches.

Clearly, user engagement and empowerment present both challenges and opportunities for sport managers and marketers. For example, in regard to unauthorized recording

or use of video of matches, the typical response of professional sport teams is to carefully guard their claim to sole rights of such material. However, given multiple ways of creating and sharing such recordings, such a response may no longer be feasible. The challenge for the sport organization is whether to try to stand against this trend or to seek ways to exploit the phenomenon (Erickson, 2007).

According to Kahle (2007), the ways in which people enjoy sport are changing and will continue to change as new media proliferate. For example, sport consumers can now receive webcasts of matches at their own chosen time and in the way, which is most convenient for them. Furthermore, fans are increasingly able to interact with other fans worldwide through venues such as blogging. As a result, according to Kahle, fans will increasingly determine what they want to watch rather than business executives. The end result is that it is increasingly important for sport marketers to listen closely to what sport consumers are saying and wanting.

Related to user engagement is the fact that Web surfers are more sophisticated than ever and expect more from websites. Creating value for the sport consumer is becoming more difficult because fans want more from their sport experience, including not only a memorable experience itself, but developing social ties and having the ability to co-produce their own experience (Richelieu, 2005). One response the sport club can make is to take advantage of fans' common attachment to the team by creating spaces where they can interact with one another, enhancing their experience of the team and of matches, thereby buttressing fan loyalty and reinforcing the team's brand (Richelieu, 2005). These spaces can include both physical locations and virtual spaces. Virtual spaces may include website forums and blogs in which sport consumers can post their comments on the team or matches and can enter into discussions with one another, as well as live chat rooms which can provide the same basic service, though synchronously.

Providing means for fans to interact with one another and with the organization through the team website can provide important benefits for marketers through increased understanding of consumers and more personalized marketing communications (Simmons, 2007). Citing Andersen (2005) and Varey (2002), Szmigin, Canning and Reppel (2005) note that dialogue with customers helps to strengthen market relationships, and there seems no reason to suppose this to be less true for sport organizations than any other. Moreover, by responding to fans' desire and even expectation for interactivity on the team website, professional sport organizations can help foster what is likely one of their main goals, a "sticky" website that is able to retain its users and have them return (Kitchin, 2006). Thus, developing ways to engage visitors on team websites may not only strengthen connections between the sport consumer and the team, it may be an important factor in increasing the time visitors spend on the site.

2. Method

The sample for this exploratory study consisted of the websites of three teams randomly selected from each of four top-tier professional sport leagues, two in North America, one in the United Kingdom and one in the United Kingdom and France. The four leagues were the following:

- The Premier League (also called Barclay's Premier League), consisting of 20 professional football teams which play out of cities and counties in England.

- Europe's Super League (also known as the engage Super League), consisting of 12 professional rugby teams, 11 of which are located in England and 1 in France.
- The National Hockey League, consisting of 30 professional ice hockey teams located in Canada and the United States. The League is divided into 2 main divisions of 15 teams each, the Eastern Conference and the Western Conference.
- The National Football League, consist of 32 professional American football teams located in the United States. The league is divided into 2 main divisions of 16 teams each—the American Football Conference and the National Football Conference.

These particular leagues were chosen for the study for several reasons. First, they were all deemed to be at the highest levels of their respective sports, and the intent of the study was to focus only on top-tier teams. Second, all these teams all had Web sites that were solely or primarily in English, which simplified data gathering. Third, the leagues were all located in countries (the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and France) with substantial populations and with some of the highest ratios of Internet users to national population (Internet World Stats, 2008). It was thus expected that teams in those leagues would have developed a stronger online presence than teams located primarily in countries with small populations or with a lower ratio of Internet users to overall population.

The random selection resulted in 3 Premier League teams in different geographical areas of England; 3 Super League teams in different geographical areas of England; 3 National Hockey League teams, 2 in the Eastern Conference and 1 in the Western Conference, all located in different geographical areas of the United States; and 3 National Football League Teams, 2 in the National Football Conference and 1 in the American Football Conference, all located in different geographical areas of the United States.

Each of the official websites of the 12 selected teams was visited and their website pages were carefully examined to determine what kinds of information and services could be accessed via the website. Two kinds of offerings were of primary interest. The first comprised the varieties of media, other than website text and static images, which visitors could access or sign up for via the website. The second comprised the kinds of visitor engagement offered via the website, other than purchasing merchandise, purchasing match tickets and betting services. These two kinds of offering were of special interest because multimedia and user engagement are two of the key developments, which define the current Web 2.0 environment. No distinction was made between free services and services offered for a fee.

The 12 official team websites were also examined to determine if they contained hyperlinks to secondary team websites. Such links were followed, and secondary websites were examined to determine if they offered to visitors either of the two types of service of interest. For example, one team website had a prominent hyperlink to a second site that included some of the team website media offerings. In addition, several official team websites had links to team-authorized social networking, forum or blog sites. Furthermore, if an official team website had a hyperlink to a league site or to a non-team site offering media services expressly related to the team, that service was considered to be a website medium offering of the team.

3. Results

3.1 Media Services

A range of different kinds of media services were available to website visitors on the websites examined. The most offered media services were downloadable video and/or audio clips with team-related content such as matches and player interviews (all 12 sites). Other media services included downloadable wallpaper and/or screensavers related to the team (11); live online audio of matches (9); podcasts (8); RSS feeds (in some cases associated with podcasts) (7); signup for emailed newsletters or emailed discussion lists (7); mobile downloads such as text alerts, games and ringtones (4); and desktop alerts or updates (2).

No teams' website had all of these kinds of media services. The websites with the most media offerings overall (19 total) were those of Premier League teams, with the 3 sites offering 7, 5 and 7 such services, respectively. National Football League team websites were second, with 6, 5 and 6 multimedia offerings, for a total of 17. The National Hockey League team websites had the third most multimedia services, 16, with the 3 websites offering 5, 5 and 6 multimedia services to visitors. The Super League team websites had the fewest multimedia offerings, with each of the 3 teams providing 3 such services.

Though the Premier League, National Football League and National Hockey League websites were similar in their numbers of multimedia offerings, one striking difference among the websites was that only the Premier League sites offered wireless downloads (all 3) and desktop alerts (2). Another difference was that only one of the Premier League websites and only one of the National Hockey League sites offered signup for emailed newsletters or emailed discussion lists, whereas all of the National Football League sites and the Super League sites offered this service.

The most striking difference among the websites other than the fact that only the Premier League sites had wireless offerings was the low number of multimedia services provided by the Super League sites. Though all 3 Super League sites offered newsletters, downloadable team-related computer screen décor and audio and/or video clips, none offered podcasts, RSS feeds or live audio, even through the associated Super League website. However, it should be noted that the official Super League website to which the 3 Super League team sites were hyperlinked did offer a service which other team websites did not appear to offer, which was live game day online television viewing of matches; however, a notice on the Super League website made clear that the service was unavailable for viewers in the UK, Europe and the Middle East. None of the Premier League, National Football League and National Hockey League sites appeared to offer live television of matches, even through league websites. This may be partly because such a service is prohibited by contracts that leagues or teams enter into with television broadcasting companies.

Table 1. provides a summary of the media services offered through the websites investigated.

Table - 1
Multimedia offerings of team websites

League team	Podcasts	RSS feeds	Screen decor	Mobile services	Live audio	Video or audio clips	Desktop alerts	e-mail newsletter/discussion
Premier								
1	x	x*	x	x	x	x		x
2			x	x	x	x	x	
3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
NFL								
1	x	x	x		x	x		x
2	x	x			x	x		x
3	x		x		x	x		x
NHL								
1	x	x	x		x	x		
2	x	x	x		x	x		
3	x	x	x		x	x		x
Super								
1			x			x		x
2			x			x		x
3			x			x		x

* "x" indicates that the media service indicated by the column head was offered either on the official team website or on a hyperlinked team-associated website.

3.2 Engaging Website Visitors

The team websites provided a number of ways for visitors to engage with the site other than buying products or tickets. Forums or message boards and polls were the most frequent visitor engagement services provided, with 8 websites offering each. Other visitor engagement services included the posting of visitor or fan images and/or text (6 sites); online games and contests connected to the team (6); feedback forms (4); blogs (4); and online communities (3). In addition, 3 websites invited visitors to submit their name for possible inclusion on a game-time scoreboard, and 1 website allowed visitors to send a message to the team mascot.

As with multimedia services, no team website had all of the different kinds of visitor engagement offerings. The websites with the most such services were those of Premier League teams and National Football League teams, with a total of 14 apiece. The three Premier league team sites offered 4, 4 and 6 such services, while National Football League team websites provided 4, 6 and 4. The National Hockey League team websites had a total of 12 visitor-engagement services, with the 3 websites offering 3, 2 and 7 such services to visitors. The Super League team websites had the fewest visitor-engagement offerings, 2 for 2 of the teams and 1 for the other.

The online communities of the three team websites which provided that service were not found on the main official team websites but were rather located through prominent hyperlinks placed on the main website. One of these (Premier League team) sites consisted of a team-associated youth site whose primary social networking modality

was live chat facilities. A second (National Football League team) site consisted of a separate team-associated site which included team-authorized blogs and visitor comments. The third (National Hockey League team) site consisted of the team's official Web presence on the social networking site myspace.com.

The most variation among teams of a single league occurred for National Hockey League websites. One of the team websites had only 2 visitor-engagement offerings. These were online polls and the opportunity for the visitor to get his or her message on a game scoreboard. In contrast, another of the hockey team websites offered the same two services, but in addition had links to authorized blog sites, a link to an authorized myspace.com web page, fan images, a message board and online contests.

As in the case of multimedia services, the Super League team websites had the fewest visitor-engagement offerings. Beyond message boards, which all 3 Super League websites offered, there was little offered in the way of visitor engagement. One of the websites offered a poll, and a second provided online team-related games. Table 2. summarizes the visitor-engagement offerings of the team websites, which were examined.

Table - 2
Visitor-engagement offerings by team websites

League team	Feedback form	Visitor text or images	Chat	Poll	Forum/ message board	Games/ contests	Online community	Blog	Other
Premier									
1	x	x*	x				x		
2	x	x		x		x			
3	x	x	x	x	x			x	
NFL									
1		x		x		x			x
2		x	x		x	x	x	x	
3	x			x	x	x			
NHL									
1					x	x		x	
2				x					x
3		x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Super									
1					x	x			
2				x	x				
3					x				

* "x" indicates that the media service indicated by the column head was offered either on the official team website or on a hyperlinked team-associated website.

4. Discussion

The examination of official websites of several teams from four top-tier sport leagues indicates that some professional sport organizations are responding more comprehensively to Web 2.0's opportunities than others. In respect to multimedia services, Premier League team websites were taking advantage of the growing interest in cell phones and wireless technology by offering team-related downloads to website visitors, while none of the other team websites examined offered such services. This was one of two major differences that were found among the websites in relation to multimedia offerings.

The other was the relative sparseness of such offerings on Super League team websites. Though Super League team sites offered downloads of video and/or audio clips and of computer screen décor, and though visitors could sign up for emailed newsletters, none offered the advanced media possibilities of podcasts, RSS feeds or wireless downloads.

The relative paucity of media offerings by Super League sites may be tied to fewer financial resources being available for their sites. If Super League teams generally have fewer monetary resources than other teams surveyed, then the possibly high costs associated with incorporating some multimedia capabilities into a website may help explain why Super League websites had less multimedia capability than other sites. However, this does not seem to explain why Super League teams, as well as some others, were lacking in some media offerings whose expense are likely relatively low, such as team-related downloadable screensavers or emailed newsletters providing news about the team. An alternative explanation for the fewer media offerings by Super League Web sites is that local support may be strong enough that the teams consider the Internet as a less important resource for securing or keeping fans than other teams do.

Greater variation appeared among the examined websites in respect to visitor engagement offerings than multimedia services. Again, the relatively fewer services in this area provided by the Super League team sites may be partly explained by their not viewing the Internet as an important marketing tool, or having fewer monetary resources to invest in their sites. Even such simple services as posting visitor-provided images or text on the site and offering feedback forms, polls, contests and/or games are labor intensive, requiring more intense monitoring of the website and timely creation of new content.

Why there are considerable differences in the amount of visitor engagement offered by the other team websites is unclear, though technological challenge and expense may be issues. Some services, such as chat, blogs and the creation of online communities, are more technologically challenging than others. Moreover, chat rooms and blogs require monitoring to prevent obscene, racist or otherwise unacceptable posts.

It is notable that the three sport organizations which had social networking sites dealt with the issue of establishing such a site in different ways. Two had their own associated sites, though one of these was geared to under-16 fans and offered only chat, while the other was open to all ages and appeared to be primarily focused on blogging. In contrast, the third organization utilized an already established social networking site to provide a location for its team-oriented community Web page. Creating a Web page on another social networking site may be a relatively simple and inexpensive solution available to a professional sport organization, which wants to have a community site, and it may worthwhile for other organizations to consider such a strategy. However, a drawback might be that the organization might not have full control over the site and would be limited in what it could accomplish there.

The phenomenon of "piggybacking" on a social networking site is only one aspect of a wider phenomenon, which was found in the study. This was the hyperlinking of the main official team site with one or more closely related sites to form a small network. A characteristic of the Internet since its beginning has been its interlinking nature-thus

the name "Web"-and the extent of interlinking was abundantly evident on the main team sites investigated, with several of them being hyperlinked to one or more secondary sites which were authorized team-associated sites.

One reason for establishing or linking to secondary sites may be to help make visitor navigation easier. Several of the websites examined were quite complex, and a secondary site may have been deemed necessary in order to help keep the main site from becoming so complex that it befuddled visitors. Moreover, some visitors' experience may be enhanced if they can visit a team-related website which caters to their special interests without having to maneuver the complexities of the main team site. This may help explain why one Premier League team had a separate website for a team-related club for children under 16.

A number of official team websites were also hyperlinked to their league site. For three of the leagues, the league site provided a media service for the team website. In the case of the National Football League and the National Hockey League, the service was online radio, which apparently is controlled by the respective leagues. In the case of Super League websites, the service provided by the league site was live television, albeit the service was unavailable in England, France or the Middle East.

There are a number of possible reasons for variations in the website offerings among teams within a particular league, whether in regard to media services or visitor-engagement modalities. One factor affecting what was offered may have been how well supported a team was locally. Teams with a stronger local following than others may have seen less need to market the team on the Internet. A possible related factor is that newer teams in a league may have viewed their websites as more important for building team loyalty than established teams did. This possibility is suggested by comparing the National Hockey League team with the fewest visitor-engagement offerings (2) to the one with the most such offerings (7). The former team was established in the 1920s, while the latter was established in the late 1990s.

Another factor affecting variations in offerings by teams within leagues may have been lack of knowledge about the effectiveness of various kinds of services. Without such knowledge, those charged with determining how best to market the teams on the Internet are required to move forward somewhat blindly. This suggests the importance for Web marketers to establish sound processes for determining the effectiveness and value of instituting different services on team sites.

Yet another factor affecting what particular teams within a league offer on their websites may have been the size of the staff charged with designing and maintaining the site. This includes the time required to maintain the site's associated functions such as uploading timely video, replying to emails, determining team-related puzzles and contests and placing the freshest team news on the site. The skill and sophistication of the staff may be an additional factor. These considerations point out the need for a sport organization to carefully assess the personnel, time and skills necessary for fulfilling its marketing strategy effectively.

5. Conclusion

All of the teams surveyed in all four leagues had websites, and all had responded to some degree to Web 2.0 opportunities by offering Web-based media services and visitor engagement modalities. In regard to media services, all 12 sites offered downloadable video and/or audio clips with team-related content. This finding suggests that the great majority of teams in the four top-tier leagues sampled are offering media services and opportunities for visitor engagement on their websites.

In regard to Web-based media services, the teams of the Premier League, National Football League and National Hockey League offered the most such services, while websites of the Super League offered the fewest. Premier League teams appeared to be taking greater advantage of media opportunities than other teams by offering wireless download and desktop alerts. None of the sites surveyed offered all of the media services that were found on various sites. This finding suggests that many teams in all four leagues sampled are missing some media opportunities.

In regard to visitor engagement services, all 12 team websites surveyed offered at least one such service to site visitors, with forums and polls being the most frequent service provided. Again, Premier League, National Football League and National Hockey League team sites offered the most such services, with one of the National Hockey League teams offering the most of any team surveyed (7). As with multimedia services, no team website had all of the different kinds of visitor engagement offerings. This suggests that many teams in the leagues sampled may be missing opportunities for visitor engagement on their websites.

For both media services and visitor engagement offerings, there was variation not only among the leagues, but among teams within each league. The greatest variations occurred for National Hockey League team websites in regard to visitor-engagement services, with one site offering only 2 such possibilities and another offering 7. This suggests that in each league sampled, there may be considerable variation among teams in their Web 2.0-related offerings.

Among the most notable visitor-engagement offerings of some of the teams were social networking sites. In each case, the social networking site was located away from the main site. Some of the main websites were also linked to other secondary sites. This linking to secondary sites may have been partly due to the complexity of the main site and an effort to make site navigation easier for visitors.

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