

Reaching the Fan through Social Networking Sites: An Exploratory Study in College Sports

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Keeping up with the competition is a common goal in college athletics. This issue extends to the marketing department with a heightened desire to utilize new media strategies (Beaton & Filo, 2009). Social networking sites (SNS) have gained popularity and as a result, many university athletic departments have created official accounts. Over the past few years, millions have accessed SNS's like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. And as of August 2009, the number of SNS users (301.5 million people) overtook the number of email users (229.2 million) worldwide (Nielsen Media, 2009). Marketers are drawn to this new communication mode because costs are minimal and their ability to reach new audiences and active (information seeking) publics is prolific. A significant body of research on Internet usage for sport organizations has been published (Caskey & Deply, 1999; Gillentine, 2003; Seo et al., 2008). However, research on SNS's in sport remains in its infancy. Thus, the purpose of this research was to analyze the current patterns and preferences of collegiate sport fans' SNS usage. We sought to understand the usage rates amongst fans including their site preferences, and whether they were 'fans' and 'followers' of official athletic department accounts.

Method. Given the lack of SNS research in sport, a "survey within a case study" methodology was used (Yin, 2008, p. 59). An intercept-survey technique was employed at five home athletic contests of the University of Florida during the 2009 regular season (i.e., men's basketball, women's basketball, soccer, and volleyball). Surveyors were strategically placed around the arenas to achieve a stratified random sample. In all, a total of 315 game attendees were surveyed. The results presented are basic and descriptive.

Results. Overall, 70% (n=222) of the respondents used at least one SNS. An overwhelming majority of the SNS users (92%; n=205) listed Facebook as their first SNS choice. Approximately, 50% (n=111) were fans of the official UF Facebook page and only 17% (n=38) were followers of the official Twitter account.

Discussion and Implications. This study provides a first glance into the prevalence of SNS's. While a majority of athletic departments may currently believe in the viral nature of SNS's, few have taken measures to evaluate user patterns and preferences. The evaluation of such information would allow athletic departments to (among other things) reach new consumers, inform existing customers, and align themselves with the 'hip' nature of these Internet outlets. Thus, future research should not only examine the effectiveness of this of new form of marketing but seek to understand its usefulness in message delivery.