

2.2 Audience Engagement and Interaction

One of the more important elements of social media strategy for sport organizations is to make sure that they deliver on the “social” part of social media. Too often, many organizations treat social media like a one-way, rather than a two-way communication tool. For social media to be a successful organizational tool, it must be engaging. Think about the relationships your organization has with its customers or relational partners offline. How does the dialogue go in conversations between the organization and these entities? Is it one-way or two-way communication? Most likely, you answered that such communication is two-way. Otherwise, the organization’s relationships with these individuals likely would have very little permanence. To be certain, it can be daunting, especially for sport organizations to manage all the engagement and feedback they get on social media, and clearly resource issues can influence how an organization responds. However, it is vital that there is a perception that the organization is listening and values what its audience and/or customers are saying. Organizations who make it a priority to put out engaging content and interact with the audience, or who embody the “social” aspect, will optimize their social media presence and build goodwill towards their audience and customers.

2.2.1 Importance of Engagement in Social Media

Strategy

As discussed earlier, social media audiences have very short attention spans and in addition, are bombarded with a seemingly never-ending amount of content. Thus, a key question for any organization, including those in sport, is how can our content stand out? One of the best ways to do this is through putting out engaging content and then engaging audience members back. While there is no “one” blueprint for developing engaging content, some general strategies include:

- *Authenticity* – content that is genuine and written in a conversational tone comes off much better than content that is written in a standard,

almost monotone matter. Consider the differences in the following tweets:

- *"For tonight's game stats of our 122-100 win over [Team X] click here"*
 - *"Want to see how dominant our performance was tonight? Check out [Player A]'s 30 points on 7-10 shooting from 3-point range! [Includes a GIF showing someone being excited!] Imaginary tweets of my creation"*
 - Which tweet would you be most likely to click on? Engaging content is content that sounds conversational! One thing organizational personnel tasked with managing social media can do is say the planned post out loud. Does it sound exciting? Like something that's going to capture attention?
- *Using Pictures/Graphics/Videos* – engaging content captures people's attention and that is very difficult to do when using only text. Certainly, it's important to write text in a conversational, and exciting manner, but without the use of visuals, it's very hard for the audience to get excited. Having a visual image is more likely to get the audience's attention because it draws the eye, whereas text only does not. Many sport organizations are fortunate because they have access to game footage that can be re-purposed into GIFs and also used to show highlights or relate to other game content. Another important area here is infographics. Graphics have become essential in social media strategy, and with capabilities such as 360-degree technology, graphics can be very engaging and captivating for an audience.
 - *Be Unique* – Posting content that is out-of-the-ordinary and unique to the organization is a great way to engage the audience. To be sure, organizations need to be careful not to stray too much from their identity and purpose on social media, but posting content that is unique helps audience members tune in so they make sure and see it and don't miss out. Some examples here include posting a picture of a snow-covered stadium, or showing team personnel or athletes doing things that would surprise the audience. A popular strategy currently is having celebrities or other noteworthy figures take over a team account for a designated period of time. Sport organizations certainly have content that always needs to be shared (e.g., game summaries, recaps) but changing things up and finding "fresh" ways to engage the audience can greatly strengthen social media strategy.

Engagement is in part content, but also in part how an organization interacts with and respond to its audiences on social media. One valuable way to that engagement can occur here is inviting or soliciting participation from audiences.

2.2.2 Strategies for Inviting Engagement and Interaction

Recall that we have discussed that for social media to be truly effective, it must be “social,” or involve some dialogue between parties. One way organizations can do this is by inviting engagement and interaction from the audience. There are both risks and drawbacks to inviting engagement, but social media itself is not without risks and as discussed earlier, if someone feels like they are only being “talked to” but never “listened to,” chances are that relationship does not last very long. Following are some ways that sport organizations can invite engagement and interaction:

- **Contests** – contests or games are a great way to get people involved. Some organizations utilize trivia contests to engage fans, while others have gone so far as to conduct scavenger hunts around the local community. Certainly, each organization has different resources, so the degree and frequency of the contests will likely vary. Additionally, contests also can be tied to in-game events and promotions. For instance, an organization could ask fans to submit their best tweet about being at the game, using a designated hashtag and then put up the best or winning tweets on a video scoreboard. Contests also can be great ways to engage corporate sponsors as well too. While integrating the sponsor must be done in a delicate manner, and cannot be plastered all over the promotion, having a sponsor associated with a content can be successful.
- **Encouraging user-generated content** – Sport fans are passionate and have strong feelings for their team. A great way to engage fans and audiences then, is to have them create and share content via social media. For instance, an organization could ask fans to send their poses of being at the stadium to Instagram using a designated hashtag and these could be displayed on a video board. An organization also could invite fans to submit content showing them in team-affiliated merchandise or tailgating before the game. As social media is predicated on sharing, many people are willing to do so, if an organization will tell them what the organization wants the audience to share and how they want them to share it!
- *Inviting Responses from the Audience* – This strategy can be useful, but also carries some risk with it, as inviting responses can lead to trolling, or people posting hateful or sarcastic things about the organization that detract from the spirit of the campaign. This particular strategy is best used when responses are likely to be safe and make sense. For example, an organization who is coming off a

successful season, who posts on social media, “Let us know what you’re most looking forward to next season,” is likely to receive more genuine responses than an organization coming off a subpar season posting the same message. Another strategy that has been used here is making a player or organization executive available to answer questions from fans. For these to be successful, it is best to limit them to a particular time frame (generally around one hour) and to make sure the person being made available is one who generally has a clean public image. For instance, there have been several sport organizations who have attempted this strategy with athletes who have a history of legal incidents and fans have turned these “ask” sessions into nothing more than a sarcastic mocking of the organization. Keep in mind that these campaigns can provide helpful feedback from fans, but the context certainly must be considered before executing.

One element that goes along with inviting and engaging fans is to make sure that the audience is rewarded. If being done in-game, this can be done with a feature on a video scoreboard and/or a small prize. If being done outside of a game, again, small prizes can be used, and at a minimum, those whose posts are featured, should receive some recognition from the organizational account (e.g., liking the post, re-tweeting or favoriting the tweet). Not only does this reward the fans who participate, but it shows the larger audience that the organization is invested in its fans and audiences, wants to hear from them, and reward them for participation. Of course, with invitation and engagement comes the potential for positive and negative feedback and sport organizations need to have, as part of their strategy, a plan or method, for dealing with both kinds of feedback.

2.2.3 Strategies for Responding to Positive Feedback

Positive feedback is something that most individuals and organizations seek. Positive feedback lets individuals and organizations what they are doing well and what we do as individuals, or what an organization does that is resonating with others – in short, positive feedback makes us feel good! Yet, surprisingly, a lot of organizations on social media, when they receive positive feedback do not acknowledge it! Certainly, if an organization is being inundated with hundreds and even thousands of comments, it can be difficult to respond to each one, but in general, the organization should be making an effort to respond to positive comments, and for smaller organizations it may be much more practical to respond to every positive comment. Why does this matter? Think about the principle of reinforcement. When a person tells us something positive, and we acknowledge them and thank them for it, they are likely to do so in the future, because we acknowledged and validated his/her feelings. Think of this another way. If a person comes into your organization and tells you something positive, what do you do? Do you ignore that person? Or do you acknowledge and validate? Of course, you acknowledge and validate – and the same, within reason, should be done on social media. Below are some strategies for responding to positive feedback:

- *Basic Acknowledgement* – At a minimum, when an organization receives a positive comment, they can acknowledge that by using the built-in feature of the platform (e.g., Facebook like, Twitter favorite, Instagram favorite). This lets the person know the organization saw their feedback and appreciates it.
- *Acknowledgement + Response* – Again, while organizational resources will vary, responding to positive feedback via acknowledgement and response is generally more effective than just acknowledging. For example, if a customer said something good about an organization on Twitter, and the organization responded by favoriting the tweet, and then re-tweeting a response like, “Thanks Andy, we are glad you had a good experience, and can’t wait to see you again!” it lets the person know not only did the organization listen, but it shows it cares by reaching out and engaging in conversation, and when people get a response from an organization, it tends to enhance their positive affiliation for the organization. One very important thing here is to make sure and personalize the response by using the person’s name. That extra step can go a long way in forging emotional connections between the audience member and the organization.

- *Rewards* – Again, while this is likely to vary by organizational resources, and is something that cannot be done all the time, reaching out and giving a tangible reward can be a great way to respond to positive feedback and promote positive feelings towards the organization. For example, perhaps a fan posted a very heartfelt note about their affinity towards the organization or how much they appreciate the organization. Responding (as indicated above) and then perhaps giving a reward such as a free ticket to an upcoming game, or a discount towards the concession stands can go a long way in reinforcing positive feelings towards the organization and cultivating loyalty.

Although positive feedback is something that needs to be recognized and appreciated, so too does negative feedback. Organizations need to be receptive to negative feedback, and as applicable, use it as a learning opportunity to understand what someone's experience is with the organization and to get better.

2.2.4 Strategies for Responding to Negative Feedback

Bad news is often uncomfortable to receive. It is hard to hear that we are not doing what we think we are doing, or at an organizational level, that someone did not have a good experience or thinks negatively of the organization. At the same time, negative feedback represents an opportunity for understanding. As difficult as it can be to hear negative feedback, it does represent the experiences of a certain portion of the audience and warrants consideration. Whereas people have always had recourse to provide negative feedback, the convenience of social media makes it very easy, and perhaps more likely for people to do so. In fact, a lot of organizations have realized this and established dedicated support and customer service accounts on platforms like Twitter to account for people no longer calling 1-800 numbers to report issues, but posting about them on social media.

There are several strategies that can be used when dealing with negative feedback. One overarching strategy that we have already mentioned is to treat negative feedback on social media like you would treat it if it occurred in your organization. What would you do if someone came in and complained? Whatever that is, do the same on social media. However, it is important to remember that people can and do become abusive on social media, and if that's the case, it is not worth pursuing resolution. Organizations can report abusive behavior to the social media platforms and block those individuals as well. Another element of negative feedback is trolls, who are common participants in sport social media. If a person is trolling and trying to "bait" the organization into a response, it is probably best to ignore as paying attention to the troll reinforces the behavior. Interestingly, in many cases, when a person is trolling an organization, other users who have had good experiences with the organization will confront the troll and attempt to drive them away. While not always successful, this does reinforce the importance of responding to positive feedback.

- *Acknowledging* – just as with positive feedback, it is important to acknowledge negative feedback. This can be done by responding to the person (using their name) and expressing an apology and asking what can be done to solve the problem. Once dialogue is established, organizations have a choice of trying to resolve the issue via social media, where the dialogue unfolds publicly, or in private (e.g., asking the person to call a number or e-mail someone). One thing organizations should consider is that for negative feedback that can be resolved quickly or is of a basic or routine nature, handling publicly in the social media forum, can be a good way to show audiences that the organization listens and is receptive to negative feedback. With

that said, for more sensitive issues or if the person seems upset, re-directing offline is a more preferable route.

- *Reward* – using a reward is a strategy that needs to be used with caution. In some cases, it can help rectify a situation and be seen as a gesture of good faith from the organization. On the other hand, it also can be seen as a way of reinforcing complaining. As part of strategy for responding, rewards may be viable when the person complaining is a known commodity to the organization (e.g., season-ticket holder) or the situation is one that is unlikely to happen consistently (e.g., family was next to a fan who was using profanity at a game). Using rewards is not something that should be done routinely, but offering an incentive as part of resolution can help bring the organization from a negative to a positive standing.
- *Know When the Issue Can't be Resolved* – given how intensely fans follow sport, often times sport organizations get negative feedback on social media for things that cannot be solved at an organizational level (e.g., bad performance by an athlete in a game) or which are not going to be resolved on social media (e.g., negative feedback about a coach getting fired). Whereas these are negative sentiments that are being expressed, responding is likely to only enflame the situation, and the organization is best served by ignoring these comments and using social media to change the narrative by putting out content that casts the organization in a positive light and which will engage fans in a positive manner.
- *Using the Feedback* – although not a direct response to feedback, it is vital that organizations assess the feedback they are getting and determine if changes are necessary. For instance, if an organization receives a lot of negative feedback on social media about the conditions of the restroom at the venue, it is warranted to investigate to see how this issue was temporary, or if it something in need of resolution. If there is a need to address the issue, then taking care of it is likely to reduce complaints in the future. Being responsive on social media is great, but if an organization does not take steps to solve the issues being complained about, eventually the responsiveness on social media will ring hollow.

Managing social media requires is a process. It requires an understanding of the culture of the various platforms and the differences among them, and assessing organizational goals and audience and determining which social media platforms are optimal to reach those audiences. Social media also requires an emphasis on content that is compelling and attractive to

audiences, and social media also requires organization to be willing evolve, and constantly be looking for ways to improve. The interactive features of social media ensure that at times, organizations will be notified by their customers and audience when things are or are not working, and it is vital that sport organizations are attentive to their audience and demonstrate that they are listening to them.

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