Organizational Representation through Twitter: An Examination of the WNBA

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Abstract

Formed in 1996, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) did not have a profitable team until 2011. By the end of 2013, however, 50% of WNBA teams turned a profit. In an effort to better understand how WNBA organizations are moving toward the trend of profitability, this study employed the excellence theory of public relations to examine how WNBA organizations are utilizing Twitter both during the season and off-season, and examined if there was a difference in Twitter usage between profitable and non-profitable teams. Using the codes provided by previous studies on social media engagement, results indicated that In-Game Information and Interactivity were the most frequent themes utilized by organizations during the season and off-season, respectively, and profitable teams were tweeting less than non-profitable teams. Findings suggest that organizations should update their followers with in-game and organizational information to foster relationships with fans.

Introduction

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) was formed in 1996 as the counterpart to the National Basketball Association (History of WNBA, 2015). In its inaugural season, the WNBA consisted of eight teams. It has since expanded to include 12 teams. This expansion did not occur with a simple addition of four teams; rather, it involved the folding of six teams and relocation of three (History of WNBA, 2015). In addition to the instability of the roster of teams in the WNBA, it took 15 seasons before a team, the Connecticut Sun, became profitable (Eaton-Robb, 2011). Although financial statements have not yet been released for last season, Lombardo (2014) reported that the WNBA expected at least six of the 12 teams to turn a profit in 2014. As evidence in Table 1, if six teams posted a profit for 2014, the number of profitable teams would remain the same as in 2013.

Table 1: *Profitable WNBA Teams*	
Year	Team
2011	Connecticut Sun
2012	Connecticut Sun
	Minnesota Lynx
	San Antonio Stars
2013	Connecticut Sun
	Minnesota Lynx
	San Antonio Stars
	Indiana Fever
	Phoenix Mercury
	Seattle Storm
2014	At least six teams
* (Eaton-Robb, 2011; Lombardo, 2014)	

The growth in the number of profitable teams within the WNBA has been attributed to increases in attendance, sponsorships, and viewership. As a whole, the league experienced an all-time attendance low of 7,457 in 2012 (Lombardo, 2014). In 2014, however, the average attendance was up to approximately 7,578.

Although it was only an increase of an average of 121 people per game, those 121 people provide ancillary revenue to the organizations in the forms of concessions, parking, and merchandise. In addition to rising attendance, there has also been a steady increase in the number of notable relationships at the league and team levels with popular national and international companies. Examples of WNBA league partners include Boost Mobile, Adidas, American Express, Bud Light, Coca Cola, EA Sports, Gatorade, Nike, Procter and Gamble, Samsung, Spalding, and State Farm (2014 WNBA Partners, 2015). Moreover, many WNBA teams have relationships with locally based sponsors. For instance, the Minnesota Lynx have partnered with Minnesota-based Mayo Clinic (Vomhof, 2014), and the Seattle Storm have partnered with Washington-based Microsoft (Evans, 2010). Perhaps the most prominent partnership, however, occurred at the league level with ESPN. The partnership between ESPN and the WNBA is scheduled to run through 2022 and is valued at $12 million per year, which is broken down to $1 million per team (Lombardo, 2014).

In addition to the direct monetary compensation associated with the partnership, the relationship between the two entities has led to increases in viewership of WNBA games. For instance, in addition to the all-time attendance low in 2012, this season also brought the all-time viewership low. In 2012, viewership of WNBA games on ESPN2 was approximately 180,000 viewers over nine games (Lombardo, 2014). This average increased in subsequent seasons as viewership improved to an average of 231,000 over 13 games in 2013, and an average of 240,000 viewers over 19 games in 2014 (Lombardo, 2014).

Although relocation and disbandment have not occurred in five years, and there have been increases in areas such as attendance (Lombardo, 2014), notable sponsorships (Lombardo, 2011), and viewership (Lombardo, 2014), the fact remains that only half of the teams within the WNBA are profitable. Given that the league is a business, profit and growth are key goals and must be addressed. One potential area in which the WNBA can improve is through establishing and maintaining relationships with fans. In today's technology-driven society, social media, specifically Twitter, provides the perfect opportunity to create and nurture relationships with current and prospective fans.

Twitter has experienced exponential growth since its launch in 2006. It was estimated that there were 14 million global Twitter users in 2008 (Plunkett Research, Inc., 2011), but the number of users grew to over 302 million active users a month in 2015 (Twitter, 2015). Twitter has become such a popular social media platform because of the twenty-four-seven access it provides into the thoughts and actions of those that users follow (McCoy, 2011), and its ability to deliver content to large audiences in a competitively crowded media field (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Given the ability of the social network to directly connect fans to athletes and vice versa without first filtering information through a public relations department, topics other than those that are game-related and team-related can be discussed (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). The benefits of Twitter may be just what the WNBA needs to address its detrimental state in which only half of its organizations are profitable.

In an effort to better understand how WNBA organizations are moving toward the trend of profitability, the purpose of this study was to focus on one area of organizational structure, that being Twitter usage. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine how WNBA organizations are utilizing Twitter both during the season and during the off-season. To better understand how organizations are interacting with consumers, this idea of media convergence was used in our study. Convergence suggests that media is a coexistence of multiple media platforms, rather than old media platforms being replaced by new media platforms, media

platforms are considered cooperative and each having a designed niche in the spectrum of platforms (Jensen, 2010). For these reasons, Twitter lends itself to being a form of media that is more in tune with a grass roots movement that can be seen in the WNBA. Individual teams can dictate their image and identity using social media, yet this is just one way in a broad spectrum of media platforms.

Literature Review

As evidenced by the fact that only six WNBA teams are profitable, the league has great room for improvement in terms of attracting and retaining fans. While it is expected that the organizations within the WNBA will continue to utilize conventional media outlets, social media has the potential to provide teams with coverage that is not first filtered through a public relations department and pitched to media outlets. With continued advancements in technology and the introduction of new media outlets, sport organizations are adopting social media to communicate with fans. Social media platforms complement outlets employed in the traditional mass media broadcast model. The implementation of these new platforms allows organizations to have more personable relationships with constituents (Hutchins, 2011), provide instantaneous information (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014), communicate directly with consumers (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014), foster involvement (Bettman, 2010), and promote their respective teams (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Twitter is seemingly the most popular social media platform in the sport industry, as each organization in the major professional leagues in the United States employs the platform in some manner (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). According to Sports Business Research Network (2014a), National Football League (NFL) teams have the highest number of followers (> 20.9 million), followed by Major League Baseball (MLB) teams (> 15.5 million), National Basketball Association (NBA) teams (> 12.7 million), and National Hockey League (NHL) teams (> 8.8 million). Interestingly, the highest percentage of followers for each of the leagues besides MLB falls between the ages of 18 to 34 (NHL – 54.2%; NBA – 52.3%; NFL – 48%; MLB – 39.4%). These numbers coincide with the demographics of the fans of each league, as a majority of fans of the NHL, NBA, and NFL are between the ages of 18 to 34, while a majority of fans of MLB are older than 35 (SBR.net, 2014b). As such, it is clear that Twitter provides organizations with the opportunity to connect with key stakeholders of their teams. While this has proven true in the major sport categories, further examination into leagues outside of these categories is warranted. Specifically, exploration into how WNBA organizations are utilizing the social media platform to build relationships is necessary.

Relationship marketing was first introduced in the services marketing industry (Berry, 1983) and has since been adopted as key component of contemporary marketing practice. Relationship marketing represents a shift from the traditionally accepted product-oriented sales approach to a consumer-oriented approach with the purpose of building long-term relationships with customers (McKelvey, 2012). In the product-oriented approach, relationships were essentially transactional. Products were provided to consumers who in turn paid for the product and the transaction was complete. The principle of relationship marketing, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of interactions, relationships, and networks (Gummesson, 1999), as well as the retention and development of existing customers (Copulsky & Wolf, 1990). Research specific to the sport industry has found that relationship marketing has the potential to increase fan loyalty, which can lead to increases in organizational outcomes such as ticket sales, sport media consumption, and licensed merchandise sales (Kim, Trail, & Ko, 2011). As a consequence, relationship marketing has the potential to increase an organization's competitive

advantage in the marketplace (Funk & James, 2001; Bee & Kahle, 2006). Furthermore, relationship marketing within the sport setting provides managers the opportunity to initiate potential relationships, preserve existing relationships, and repair damaged relationships (Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012).

With these outcomes in mind, relationship marketing has the potential to foster the growth of the WNBA. While profitable teams in other leagues may be willing to risk relationships with fans by being less personable with fans, the WNBA must consider the implications of nurturing existing and developing new relationships with consumers if hopes of profitability across the league are to be achieved. One manner in which these relationships can be examined is through the excellence theory of public relationships, which stress the importance of engagement and two-way conversations to maximize long-term relationships with stakeholders (Waters & Williams, 2011). The excellence theory suggests that organizations transfer from being organization-centric communication practices to engaging and audience-focused practices, which in turn will guide the organization to achieving long-term financial and participatory goals (Grunig, 2006), which is a current need for half of the teams in the WNBA.

The perspectives of the excellence theory have fueled scholarly research on the organization-public relationship (OPR), which is defined as "the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18). OPR includes three dimensions: professional relationship, personal relationship, and community relations (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). The dimensions of the OPR align with the principles of relationship marketing, as organizations explore strategies to develop and foster relationships with constituents.

The principles of relationship marketing, the excellence theory, and OPR can be applied in the social media setting through the four models of public relations, which range on a continuum from one-sided emotional messages to legitimate conversations (Waters & Williams, 2011). The first model, press agentry, is a one-sided model that utilizes emotional messages and may be used to manipulate the audience. Communication that utilizes press agentry serves to garner attention and interest, at times going far enough to be considered sensationalism. The second model, public information, also uses a one-way approach but rather than focusing on emotional messages to manipulate, the messages conveyed are truthful and serve to provide consumers with accurate information (Waters & Williams, 2011). The final two models of public relations operate on the two-way side of the continuum. For instance, two-way asymmetry utilizes market research and a faux dialogue with stakeholders to obtain information for organizational benefit, as questions are asked and answered. The final model, two-way symmetry, consists of legitimate conversations between organizations and stakeholders that are mutually beneficial (Waters & Williams, 2011). Research has suggested that although two-way communication practices are desirable, one-way practices not only still exist, but are actually more dominant than two-way practices (Tindall & Waters, 2010).

Given the current state of the WNBA, understanding how the teams within the league communicate is essential in the development and fostering of relationships with potential and current stakeholders. Given the prominence of Twitter in the sport industry, the social media platform was chosen as focus of this study. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine how WNBA organizations are utilizing Twitter both during the season and during the off-season. A content analysis of 2,448 tweets was conducted to address the following research questions:

RQ$_1$: How are WNBA teams communicating with stakeholders on Twitter during the WNBA season?

RQ$_2$: How are WNBA teams communicating with stakeholders on Twitter during the WNBA off-season?

RQ$_3$: Are there differences in the methods of communication of the profitable teams and the nonprofitable teams?

Method

Data Collection

Data were collected from all 12 WNBA organizations. Every organization was verified by Twitter, a badge that helps to "establish authenticity of identities of key individuals and brands on Twitter" (Twitter, 2014). Using the website *allmytweets.com*, every tweet and retweet from the 2013 season was pulled. The website allowed the researchers to enter a Twitter handle (e.g. @seattlestorm) into the search engine and every tweet from the respective profiles was organized in chronological order. From the website, the tweets were put into an Excel document for organization. For accuracy of the tweets, the first 50 tweets were double checked between the pulled tweets and the organization's Twitter profile to ensure reliability. The tweets and number of tweets and followers were pulled in November of 2014.

Once every tweet was collected and organized by team, the tweets were separated into in-season and off-season for each individual team. The date for the first regular season and last game (whether the team made the playoffs or not), was used to decide in-season and off-season for every team. A total of 24,480 tweets were pulled from the 12 teams. Due to the overwhelming number of tweets, every tenth tweet was pulled for coding, resulting in 2,448 tweets examined for this study. The coded tweets by team ranged from 72 total tweets to 281 total tweets by the San Antonio Stars and Minnesota Lynx, respectively.

Data Analysis

Using the codes provided by Hambrick et al. (2010) and Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2012), every tenth tweet of the total 24,480 tweets was coded. Hambrick and colleagues came up with the initial six categories of: *Interactivity*, *Diversion*, *Information Sharing*, *Content*, *Fanship*, and P*romotion.* Greenhalgh and Greenwell expanded on the *Information Sharing* category (adding *In-Game Information*, *Player Information*, *Team Information*, and *Game Extension*) and *Promotional* category (adding *Events*, *Tickets*, *Team Goods/Services*, *Others*, *Sponsors*, and *Team Affiliated Corporate Social Responsibility*). The three independent raters read each tweet and associated a code number with the tweet, depending on the message of the tweet. The code number and code definitions and examples can be found in Table 2. Tweets that could have been coded by multiple numbers (e.g. *team information* and *content)* were coded by the meaning of the message. Initially, the three raters agreed on 81.5% of the tweets. Disagreements on the difference were resolved, leading to a 100% agreement.

Table 2: *Definitions and Examples of Codes*

Code	Definition	Example
Interactivity	Tweets directed at fans or retweets of fans	"@hologramsteven SUPER AWESOME!!!! #sparkshardingchat"
Diversion	Non-sports related information	"Happy Valentine Day everyone!!!!! :)"
Information Sharing: In-game	Insight into information during a game	"KT nails the freebie. Sparks ball. #GoSparks #BeatPHX"
Information Sharing: Player	Insight into player information	"@Nnemkadi30 is just lovely at the free throw line. Thanks SSS! #GoSparks"
Information Sharing: Team	Insight into team information	"Sparks fall 77-78 in Game 3"
Information: Game Extension	Information about non-fan related events: pre-game shoot around	"Coach Hughes with @danirob13 walking through inbound plays"
Content	Links, pictures, videos, and other websites	"Kristi & Marissa running some dribbling drills at Simi Valley Ford #GoSparks (link to Instagram account photo)"
Fanship	Discussing sports (or teams) other than their own	"Congrats to the @minnesotalynx! 2013 @WNBA champions"
Promotional: Events	Publicity regarding team events	"Game day vs. the Seattle Storm. Tip-off is at 1pm @LBSUAthletics"
Promotional: Tickets	Publicity regarding ticket information	"It's not to late to purchase your pre-season tickets for 5/12 and 5/19 games. #GoSparks
Promotional: Team's Goods/Services	Publicity regarding goods and services provided by the organization	"We just love our @OleSkoolCrew #StraightJammin #GoSparks
Promotional: Others	Publicity of others	"WNBA & ESPN extend their partnership for another six years, paving the way for games to be televised on AVC, ESPN, & ESPN2 through 2022."
Promotional: Sponsors	Publicity of sponsors associated with the organization	"Big thank you to @ChipotleTweets for providing the team with lunch at @HabitatLA #SparksBuild13
Promotional: Team Affiliated CSR	Publicity of corporate social responsibility performed by the organization	"Great morning at #HomeWalk! Thank you to all who join #TeamSparks"

Results

Of the 2,248 tweets, 76.1% were created during the season and 23.9% occurred during the offseason. The results, as illustrated in Table 3, revealed *In-Game Information*, *Interactivity*, and *Content* were the most popular themes during the season. *Interactivity* and *Content* were the most common themes during the offseason. Profitable teams were also tweeting less than non-profitable teams during both in-season and the off-season.

The first research question for this study asked how WNBA organizations were communicating with key stakeholders through Twitter during the season. The results found that seven of the 12 (58.3%) teams' most frequent theme during the season was *In-Game Information*. *In-Game Information* can be described as any insight during a game in which the team played. An example of this was seen when the Seattle Storm tweeted, "With 3 minutes remaining in the fourth quarter the @seattlestorm keep the lead 68-60! Get LOUDER #StormNation! #GoStorm!." The advantage to this tweet is to keep fans engaged and updated with the team, despite the lack of television exposure for WNBA games and teams. Four of the 12 (33%) teams included tweets of *Interactivity* as their most common theme. *Interactivity* during the season can be used

to encourage fans and followers to follow the game via Twitter, watch the game on television if able to, or even attend the game. Finally, one team, the San Antonio Stars, had *Content* as their most prevalent theme during the season. *Content* came in the form of any pictures, outgoing links, videos, news source or any other material that was not originated on Twitter.

Table 3: *Results of Coding by Team and Season*

Organization	Total Tweets	In-Season Tweets	In-Season Use	Off-Season Tweets	Off-Season Use
Atlanta Dream	279	193 (69.2%)	Interactivity	86 (30.8%)	Content
Chicago Sky	245	158 (64.5%)	In-Game Info	87 (35.5%)	Interactivity
Connecticut Sun	116	105 (90.5%)	In-Game Info	11 (9.5%)	Content
Indiana Fever	185	149 (80.5%)	In-Game Info	36 (19.5%)	Content
Los Angeles Sparks	200	155 (77.5%)	In-Game Info	45 (22.5%)	Interactivity
Minnesota Lynx	281	238 (84.6%)	In-Game Info	43 (15.4%)	Content
New York Liberty	187	154 (82.4%)	Interactivity	33 (17.6%)	Interactivity
Phoenix Mercury	223	160 (71.7%)	Interactivity	63 (28.3%)	Interactivity
San Antonio Stars	72	55 (76.4%)	Content	17 (23.6%)	Content
Seattle Storm	218	158 (72.4%)	Interactivity	60 (27.6%)	Interactivity
Tulsa Shock	251	162 (64.5%)	In-Game Info	89 (35.5%)	Interactivity
Washington Mystics	191	176 (92.2%)	In-Game Info	15 (7.8%)	Interactivity

The second research question for this study asked how WNBA organizations were communicating with key stakeholders through Twitter during the off-season. The results found that most WNBA teams are concentrated on interacting with their fans and uploading content from the season or the offseason news from their players. Seven of the 12 (58.3%) teams had *Interactivity* as the most common theme during the offseason. Teams like the LA Sparks tweeted, "@Neal__3 I loved track I also did gymnastics as well for a while. I can still tumble. #sparkshardingchat" when Spark player Lindsey Harding took over the LA Sparks Twitter account. This provides the fan base a chance to engage with a major sport organization or star player. The remaining five (42.7%) teams had *Content* as their most used tweet theme during the offseason. The Minnesota Lynx included extra content in their offseason tweets to keep fans caught up on players, "Video: http://on.nba.com/10Te7nt @seimoneaugustus chats 1-on-1 about camp's intensity & preseason games plus gives us a Russian vocab lesson."

This study also investigated the difference in Twitter activity between non-profitable teams and profitable teams (RQ$_3$). The six non-profitable teams tweeted more often (56.3%) than the six profitable teams (44.7%), both in season and during the off season. Teams that were not profitable engaged their fan-base through *Interactivity*, *Event Promotion*, *Ticket Promotions* and even *Corporate Social Responsibility.* Their strategy is to engage the audience through activity and promotions to help them feel connected. Profitable teams were more likely to post tweets of *In-Game Information*, *Team Information*, *Player Information*, and *Content.* The goal of the themes was to promote information directly to the fan base and keep the organization in the minds of the fan base.

Discussion

Using the framework of the excellence theory of public relationships, this study examined how WNBA organizations communicate with stakeholders on Twitter in and out of season. The excellence theory of public relations focuses on the importance of engagement and two-way conversations tin an effort to maximize long-term relationships with stakeholders (Waters &

Williams, 2011). Of the over 2,000 tweets examined in this study, WNBA organizations were far more likely to Tweet with and to fans during the season. This is not surprising considering most teams would use Twitter as a platform to communicate real-time, in-game action to fans. Additionally, WNBA teams were likely to interact with fans via Twitter to share team-related content and/or to encourage fans to follow the game via Twitter, watch the game on television, or even attend the game. This type of communication emphasizes the professional dimension of the organization-public relationship, as well as the public relations model of sharing public information. WNBA teams engage their fans by sharing information about the team and/or encouraging fans to "follow" respective teams via social media platforms like Twitter or on traditional media such as television and radio.

During the off-season, teams switched communication tactics to focus on player/fan engagement. In other words, WNBA organizations used Twitter as a platform for the fans to engage with a major sport organization or star player through content and interactivity. *Content* revolving around the players is especially important during the off-season because roughly 66% of WNBA players went overseas to play basketball in 2014 (Overseas Rosters, 2014). By providing statistics and highlights of their favorite players while they are overseas, followers can remain engaged with the organization, despite not being able to attend games. The use of *Interactivity* and *Content* keeps the fans engaged during the offseason with the organization. The off-season provides a unique time to provide behind the scenes information and to capture the interest of the organization's fans and followers when games are not being played.

This engagement has the potential to help fans build personal connections to the player and, thus, the organization. Moreover, the personal connection WNBA teams and players build with fans is a critical link in building the organization-public relationship. It also exemplifies the public relations model of two-way symmetry. That is, the WBNA team builds a relationship with stakeholders through personal engagement. The stakeholder develops an attachment to the team. It is then assumed the stakeholder will support the team through game attendance and/or the purchase of team merchandise. Thus, the relationship built through Twitter is beneficial for the team and the fan.

Finally, this study explored possible differences in methods of Tweeting (e.g., communicating with fans) for profitable versus not-profitable teams. Profitable teams were more likely to post tweets of *In-Game Information*, *Team Information*, *Player Information*, and *Content,* while teams that were not profitable engaged their fan-base through *Interactivity*, *Event Promotion*, *Ticket Promotions* and even *Corporate Social Responsibility*. Teams that have yet to turn a profit can utilize *Content* to provide clips from practice, game recaps, player videos or a variety of other external sources that can be used to give followers a behind the scenes look into the team or provide updates for those that are not able to follow the game. The delivery of content also enhances opportunities for interactivity. While interactivity was not the communication approach most utilized by profitable teams, personal engagement with teams and players is vital to building relationships between WNBA organizations and their current and prospective fan bases.

Given the importance of understanding how the WNBA can not only survive but thrive as a league, it is important to identify how future research could address the issues outlined in this study. Future research should provide a deeper analysis of the relevance of the tweets. This study solely examined the quantity of tweets and content of tweets. Further analysis into the number of retweets, favorites, and replies could potentially lead to a better understanding of the impact of each type of tweet. Another area for future analysis is to compare the ways in which

the WNBA teams are utilizing Twitter to organizations in profitable leagues. Are there differences in the way organizations are employing social media? Along the same lines, it would be interesting to compare the results of this study to other professional niche sports to see if similarities exist in social media practices. It would be particularly beneficial to further examine how WNBA organizations can stay engaged with fans through social media during the long off-season. This information might be ascertained through interviews with customer service managers for the organizations, as well as fans of the organizations.

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