

How Are MLB Teams Using Twitter to Engage Fans?

Matthew C. Albritton

University of Florida

Research Methods in Digital Communication

MMC 5427

Dr. Andrew Selepak

April 26, 2013

Abstract

The use of social media in sports is prevalent among teams and fans at all levels of play. Sports teams are embracing the utility of social media as a new marketing channel. Twitter, the world's fastest growing social media platform, gives sports teams an opportunity to engage a large amount of fans using specialized content and two-way communication. Major League Baseball teams are utilizing Twitter in a variety of ways, yet there is insufficient research to determine the effectiveness of Twitter as a marketing tool in the sport of baseball. This study focuses on Major League Baseball teams and fan engagement on Twitter to discover what marketing strategies are being used and how success is measured.

How Are MLB Teams Using Twitter to Engage Fans?

Introduction

Social media has developed into a powerful marketing tool for organizations to reach customers. Organizations can use social media channels to reach current and potential customers quickly, while delivering unique content and encouraging interaction (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). In recent years, the use of this medium has become especially popular in the sports entertainment industry (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). Major League Baseball (MLB) teams have a strong presence in all social media channels, especially on Twitter (McKeon, 2012).

Twitter has emerged as one of the most popular social media channels. It is the fastest growing social media platform globally, and it continues to have tremendous growth in the United States (Finn, 2013; Twitter now, 2013). MLB teams are currently using Twitter in a variety of ways to engage fans, such as providing general information, offering special promotions, and interacting with fans individually (McKeon, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to discover how MLB teams are using Twitter to engage fans. Specifically, it seeks input from all thirty MLB teams to identify what strategies are being utilized, who is involved the process, and how efforts are being measured. In-depth interviews will be conducted to gather data for comparison and discussion. The goal is to determine what teams are having the most success on Twitter by defining Key Performance Indicators and Return on Investment.

Defining Social Media

The concept of social media has been in existence since the 1950s. The rise of high-speed Internet has regenerated the concept as a form of new media (Witkemper, Lim, & Yoon, 2012).

Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) provide a concise definition of social media in terms of new media, describing it as a: “group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of user generated content.” Web 2.0 is described as online applications that promote information sharing and collaboration while focusing on a user-centered design (Rothschild, 2011).

To provide further understanding of social media, Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) provided a classification system for the various social media platforms. The classes they have created are: blogs and micro-blogs (e.g., Blogger, Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Google+), content communities (e.g., YouTube, Instagram), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). This research proposal will concentrate on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, which is recognized as the most popular micro-blogging site in the world (Timely, 2013).

Twitter Usage and Growth

A publication from LeClerc (2009) defines micro-blogging as: “the practice of posting small pieces of digital content—which could be text, pictures, links, short videos, or other media—on the Internet.” Although it is classified as a micro-blog, Twitter (2013) defines itself as: “a real-time information network that connects users to the latest stories, ideas, opinions, and news.” The information is relayed through small bursts of information called “Tweets”, which are limited to 140 characters (Twitter, 2013). Unlike many social networking sites, Twitter users can follow other users without reciprocation, unless an account is made private (Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon, 2010). Users range from private individuals to large organizations.

Twitter has developed a markup culture that has become common practice when responding to tweets. Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon (2010) identify three of the primary markups:

“RT stands for retweet, ‘@’ followed by a user identifier address the user, and ‘#’ followed by a word represents a hashtag.” Retweeting allows a user to share another user’s tweet with their followers (Parr, 2009). The ‘@’ sign followed by a username allows a user to refer to a specific individual. This is also referred to as a mention (Walker, 2011). A hashtag allows a user to tag a tweet with a context by placing a pound sign (#) in front of a keyword (Reynolds, 2012). These markups allow tweets to be categorized for use in Twitter’s search function. Twitter also organizes the markups to identify trending topics, most popular users, and most popular tweets (Walker, 2011). An organization can use these markups to measure metrics in regards to customer engagement and Return On Investment (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, it’s important to look at Twitter’s growth rate around the world and in the United States. Major League Baseball has a global audience, but the majority of it lies within the U.S. As of April 2013, Twitter has over 288 million active users and over 500 million total users, (Smith, 2013). Active users are those who log in at least once a month (Bennett, 2012). On average, Twitter users send over 400 million tweets per day (Tsukayama, 2013). Twitter was the fastest growing global social platform in 2012, seeing a 40% increase from Q2 to Q4 (Finn, 2013). As of April 2013, 21% of the Internet population is active Twitter users (Finn, 2013).

Twitter continues to grow in popularity in the United States as well. From Q2 to Q4 in 2012, Twitter saw its U.S. users rise 94%, accounting for 33.8 million active users and 59 million overall accounts (Twitter now, 2013). The user increase can be attributed to three factors: mobile devices, older demographics, and mass media integration (Twitter now, 2013). In 2012, active mobile Internet users rose from 37% to 43% (Twitter now, 2013). Active U.S. users over the age of 55 grew 116%, while users aged 45-54 grew 81% (Twitter now, 2013). Finally, the

trend of Twitter integration into mass media campaigns such as TV, film, radio, and sports advertising has assisted in the tremendous growth of U.S. Twitter popularity (Twitter now, 2013).

Relationship Marketing in Sports

Relationship marketing was introduced to the marketing field in the 1980s and became common practice by the mid-1990s (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 2004). It is currently a staple in all service-marketing operations (Williams & Chinn, 2010). The primary goal of relationship marketing is to solidify long-term relationships with an organization's best customers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). If implemented properly, relationship marketing will contribute to stronger brand awareness, increased understanding of consumer needs, enhanced loyalty, and added value for consumers (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Consistent management of these relationships using two-way communication is essential. Organizations and consumers must provide and seek meaningful information to achieve the goal of relationship marketing (Williams and Chinn, 2010).

Kim (2008) conducted a study that focused on the quality of the relationship between sport fans and sports organizations. Martin (2012) analyzed Kim's study, saying it addressed "relationship-quality characteristics (e.g., trust, commitment, liking, intimacy, connection, reciprocity, satisfaction) and their impact on sport-consumption behaviors (e.g., purchase of team licensed apparel, game attendance, media usage)." The results of the study revealed a direct correlation between relationship quality and behavioral outcomes (Martin, 2012). When fans feel they have a high quality relationship with a team, they are more likely to purchase apparel and tickets, and also consume what the team has to offer through media channels (Martin, 2012). Using social media, teams can engage their fans to grow these high quality relationships.

Social media provides organizations and consumers a specific media channel to engage in relationship marketing. This form of new media allows both parties to easily participate in two key components of relationship marketing, communication and interaction (Grönroos, 2004). Social media provides direct contact between users, which allows organizations to execute planned messages towards consumers, such as advertising or sales promotions (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldberger, 2012). Planned messages should not be the only form of communication in relationship marketing however. Service messages and unplanned messages allow organizations to connect with consumers on another level, where they can develop intimate relationships by relaying organizational values and ideals (Duncan & Moriarty, 1997). This entire model provides sports teams, as organizations, a great opportunity to connect with fans, as consumers.

Social Media and Sports

The growth of social media allows sports teams to explore new techniques in connecting with fans. Prior to social media and Web 2.0, sports teams relied on traditional media marketing, which limited interaction between teams and fans (Martin, 2012). These interactions were controlled by the team and did not encourage two-way communication. Seo and Green (2008) conducted a study and found that fans prefer the Internet, specifically social media, to learn more about their favorite teams and demonstrate their support. Social media outlets as a marketing channel are also desirable for teams due to low entry costs and large fan base presences (Rothschild, 2011). Traditional media marketing approaches have become less desirable due to higher costs and consumer resistance to advertising (Rothschild, 2011). Hur, Ko, and Valacich (2007) found that the convenience and benefits of social media interaction have increased fans' motivation to connect with their favorite teams.

Major League Baseball (MLB) teams are incorporating this new form of marketing in a variety of ways. They want to understand and meet the expectations of fans to build a loyal fan base and also prevent losing customers (McKeon, 2012). Social media has become a preferred method in achieving this goal. Teams can provide personalized updates about promotional contests, seat upgrades, player transactions, scores, and game highlights (McKeon, 2012). They can also listen to their customers on a whole new level, as opposed to relying on phone calls, direct mail, or e-mail (McKeon, 2012). Social media allows MLB teams to hear from a much larger portion of their fan bases and gather positive and negative feedback. The teams can respond to the feedback much faster through social media, either by implementing recommendations or responding personally to a fan.

Fans are embracing the opportunity to interact with their favorite teams, specifically on Twitter. A study conducted in 2012 revealed that MLB teams who received the most Twitter mentions, retweets, and hashtag usage from fans are seeing increased attendance numbers (Gershkoff, 2012). The teams that actively create a platform for engagement by directing questions towards fans from a team's official Twitter handle have had the most success, such as the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Yankees (Gershkoff, 2012). The teams that use Twitter only to live Tweet their games and offer promotional information, such as the Cleveland Indians, have had much lower attendance numbers than teams with an interactive approach (Gershkoff, 2012). The study also found that the correlation between fan responses and attendance is unaffected by poor team performance (Gershkoff, 2012). Based on this study by Gershkoff (2012), MLB teams should strive to create an exciting fan experience on Twitter to achieve increased profits at the ballpark.

Examples of MLB Teams Twitter Usage

All thirty MLB teams have official Twitter accounts. The league provides a digital framework from MLB Advanced Media for simple integration (McKeon, 2012). However, the type of content each team publishes on Twitter varies. The Kansas City Royals use Twitter for game-related developments, such as scores, highlights, trades, injuries, photos, videos, traffic, and weather updates (McKeon, 2012). The Royals respond to general questions from individual fans, such as “What time do parking lots open (McKeon, 2012)?” They do not respond to tweets related to poor team performance (McKeon, 2012). The Royals also allow fans to vote on polls related to in-game promotions, such as what T-shirt will be handed out as a free giveaway (McKeon, 2012). The Oakland Athletics have a similar strategy for fan interaction, allowing fans to vote on which food items will be served at the games (McKeon, 2012).

The Boston Red Sox use their official Twitter account similarly to the Royals and the Athletics in terms of fan interaction. They offer fans the opportunity to vote on favorite contests and music in between innings (McKeon, 2012). The Red Sox also try to reach their global audience via Twitter. They have recently been applauded for being the first MLB team to introduce a Japanese-language Twitter account on February 8, 2013 (Axisa, 2013). The Red Sox also have a Spanish-language Twitter, which they created in 2011 (Koski, 2013). The only other team to have an official Spanish-language Twitter account is the New York Yankees (Koski, 2013). More MLB teams are expected to adopt this approach, which encourages greater interaction with a global fan base (Axisa, 2013).

Another team recognized for their unique Twitter efforts is the Tampa Bay Rays. The Rays have two distinct approaches for their official team account. The first approach follows the traditional mold of providing game and team-related news, photos, and highlights (Clobridge,

2011). The second approach provides behind-the-scenes information, humorous insights, and in-game contests designed for fans inside the stadium (Clobridge, 2011). The Rays also interact with fans regularly using mentions (Clobridge, 2011). Clobridge (2011) says the Rays have a “model” approach by sharing “slice-of-life” moments with followers.

MLB teams are constantly making changes to their Twitter strategies. Some teams seem to place more emphasis on this style of relationship marketing than others, however. The Cleveland Indians use their official Twitter account to link fans to outside sources, such as a WordPress blog called TribeVibe (McKeon, 2012). The blog provides extended posts and encourages interaction, but receives less attention than the Indians’ official Twitter account. Many teams are failing to take advantage of Twitter, according to a fan engagement study conducted on April 17, 2013 by Darren Heitner of Forbes. Heitner (2013) ranked each teams’ social media engagement efforts and compared them to average home game attendance (percentage of stadium capacity). The study found that teams with the least social media activity had the lowest percentage of attendance (Heitner, 2013). Ranking at the bottom of this list are the Miami Marlins (30th), Arizona Diamondbacks (29th), Pittsburgh Pirates (28th), and Chicago White Sox (27th) (Heitner, 2013). The Diamondbacks and the Marlins, in particular, have an extremely low number of followers compared to the rest of the league (Heitner, 2013).

Measuring Twitter Success with Key Performance Indicators

Determining success on a social media platform can be difficult due to the lack of bottom-line conversions. Organizations must take into account many factors that can be easily measured, yet difficult to place a value on. In terms of this study, a MLB team should focus on investments made by fans through social media usage (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). An emphasis should be placed on long-term payoffs rather than short-term results (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on Twitter are measurable metrics, and can be broken down into three categories: Brand Awareness, Brand Engagement, and Word of Mouth (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). By measuring these KPIs, an organization can properly calculate Return on Investment in regards to Twitter (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

The purpose of Brand Awareness for an organization is to increase exposure to current and potential customers. The measurable Twitter KPIs for Brand Awareness are: number of tweets about the brand (mentions and hashtags), valence of tweets (positive over negative), and number of followers (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). MLB teams can increase Brand Awareness KPIs by offering a bevy of information to fans. Teams can encourage fans to interact by creating hashtags specific to the team. Teams can influence the valence of tweets by offering incentives to fans such as special promotions, tickets, and apparel discounts. In addition to online efforts, teams can gain followers using traditional media campaigns by asking fans to follow their Twitter accounts.

After a customer is aware of a brand's presence on Twitter, it's important to regularly interact with those customers (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). This is done through Brand Engagement. The measurable Twitter KPIs for Brand Engagement are: number of followers, and number of replies (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). MLB teams can influence Brand Engagement by creating Twitter contests that involve user-generated content (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Teams can also take action by responding to questions from fans, or by recognizing tweets that are consistent with the team's message. Polls that require fan input are another way teams can contribute to Brand Engagement.

Once customers are aware of a brand and are actively engaged, organizations rely on those customers to spread a positive message through Word of Mouth (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

Word of Mouth is a great way for organizations to gain new customers (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). The measurable Twitter KPIs for Word of Mouth are: number of retweets, and number of customer tweets about the brand (mentions and hashtags) (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). MLB teams can influence Word of Mouth by asking fans to retweet specific messages. The strategies involved in increasing Brand Awareness and Brand Engagement can all be applied to Word of Mouth, as long as teams are encouraging fans to share their experiences with their Twitter followers.

To properly analyze KPIs, an organization must choose a measuring tool (Paine, 2011). The data is always available, but it can be difficult to categorize without the help of analytics software (Paine, 2011). There are many options available that focus strictly on social media, and the costs vary greatly. Organizations need to decide what analytics tool is right for them to get the best results without negatively affecting their ROI (Paine, 2011).

Research Questions

This study aims to measure the efforts MLB teams are using to engage fans on Twitter. Previous studies have been conducted relating to social media usage in sports, but these studies address social media as a whole, rather than focusing on a particular channel, such as Twitter. Furthermore, these studies have failed to address MLB teams specifically. To provide a thorough understanding of how and why MLB teams are using Twitter, this study will address the following questions:

[RQ1] What key objectives do MLB teams wish to accomplish via Twitter?

[RQ2] What strategies are MLB teams implementing to accomplish the key objectives?

[RQ3] How much staffing is dedicated to Twitter?

[RQ4] How are MLB teams measuring their efforts on Twitter?

[RQ5] Are MLB teams able to link increased profits to Twitter?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, in-depth interviews will be conducted with representatives from all thirty MLB teams. Interview subjects must be employed within a team's social media department. Subjects must also have input on a team's Twitter account. The ideal subject for each team would be the social media manager, but employees with Twitter involvement will suffice. The preferred methods for interviews are telephone or video chat, depending on convenience for the interviewee. Exceptions will be made for e-mail if it is the only option available.

The results of the interviews are expected to yield quantitative and qualitative data. The answers of each question will be quantitatively categorized to provide comparisons between teams. Unique answers will be used qualitatively to provide detailed findings and provide further discussion. The results will ultimately determine which MLB teams have the most successful Twitter strategies, how they are measuring success, and what affect Twitter has on ROI and overall profits.

References

- Axisa, M. (2013, February 8). Red Sox become first team to launch Japanese-language Twitter feed. *CBSSports*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://www.cbssports.com/mlb/blog/eye-on-baseball/21670125/red-sox-become-first-team-to-launch-japanese-language-twitter-feed>
- Bennett, S. (2012, January 13). Twitter on track for 500 million total users by March, 250 million active users by end of 2012. *mediabistro*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-active-total-users_b17655
- Berry, L. L., Shostak, G. Lynn., Upah, G. D., American Marketing Association., . (1983). *Emerging perspectives on services marketing*. Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association.
- Clobridge, M. (2011, August 14). Why one MLB team is a model for school Twitter use. *EdSocialMedia*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://www.edsocialmedia.com/2011/08/why-one-mlb-team-is-a-model-for-school-twitter-use/>
- Duncan, T., & Moriarty, S. (1997). *Driving brand value: using integrated marketing to manage profitable stakeholder relationships*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Finn, G. (2013, January 30). Twitter now the fastest growing global social platform, 21% of the Internet population are active users. *Marketing Land*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://marketingland.com/twitter-now-the-fastest-growing-global-social-platform-21-of-the-internet-population-are-active-users-32062>

- Gershkoff, A. (2012, May 10). Can MLB teams tweet their way to higher attendance?. *The Huffington Post Sports*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-gershkoff/mlb-attendance-twitter_b_1504664.html
- Grönroos, C. (2004). The relationship marketing process: communication, interaction, dialogue, value. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 19(2), 99-113. doi: 10.1108/08858620410523981
- Heitner, D. (2013, April 18). San Francisco Giants lead all MLB teams in fan engagement. *Forbes*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2013/04/18/san-francisco-giants-lead-all-mlb-teams-in-fan-engagement/>
- Hoffman, D. L., & Fodor, M. (2010). Can you measure the ROI of your social media marketing? *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 52(1), 41-49. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/757349606?accountid=10920>
- Hur, Y., Ko, Y. J., & Valacich, J. (2007). Motivation and concerns for online sport consumption. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21(4), 521-539. Retrieved from <http://journals.humankinetics.com.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/AcuCustom/SiteName/Documents/DocumentItem/10641.pdf>
- Kaplan, A., & Haenlin, M. (2010). "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media." *Business Horizons*, 53(1), pp. 59-68. doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003
- Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P., & Silvestre, B.S. (2011). "Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media." *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54, pp. 241-251. doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005

- Kim, Y. K. (2008). *Relationship framework in sport management: How relationship quality affects sport consumption behaviors*. Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida.
- Koski, H. (2013, February 11). Red Sox 1st MLB team to manage Japanese Twitter account. *Sports Business Now*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://sportsbusinessnow.com/red-sox-1st-mlb-team-to-manage-japanese-twitter-account/>
- LeClerc. (2009). 7 things you should know about...Microblogging. *EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7051.pdf
- Madden, M. & Zickuhr, K. (2011). "65% of online adults use social networking sites." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved April 17, 2013. From <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP-SNS-Update-2011.pdf>
- Martin, S. (2012). *Share, like, tweet, and cheer: an examination of social media usage and the NFL*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- McKeon, A. (2012, July). MLB teams batting a thousand with social CRM strategy. *SearchCRM*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/feature/MLB-Teams-Batting-a-Thousand-with-Social-CRM>
- Paine, K. D. (2011). Measuring the real ROI of social media. *Communication World*, 28(1), 20-23. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/921621211?accountid=10920>
- Parr, B. (2009, August 16). How to: retweet on Twitter. *Mashable*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://mashable.com/2009/04/16/retweet-guide/>
- Reynolds, M. (2012). What is a hashtag? A deep dive into examples and applications. *SpinWeb*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://www.spinweb.net/blog/what-is-a-hashtag-a-deep-dive-into-examples-and-applications/>

- Rothschild, P. C. (2011). Social media use in sports and entertainment venues. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 2(2), 139-150. doi: 10.1108/175829511111136568
- Seo, W. J., & Green, B. C. (2008). Development of the motivation scale for sport online consumption. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22, 82-109. Retrieved from <http://journals.humankinetics.com.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/AcuCustom/SiteName/Documents/DocumentItem/15395.pdf>
- Smith, C. (2013, April 3). How many people use the top social media, apps & services?. *Digital Marketing Ramblings... - The Latest Digital Marketing Tips, Trends and Technology*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/resource-how-many-people-use-the-top-social-media/>
- Stavros, C., Pope, N. K. L., & Winzar, H. (2008). Relationship marketing in Australian professional sport: An extension of the Shani framework. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 17(3), 135-145. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/228064445?accountid=10920>
- Timely, T. (2013, April 18). Top 10 Microblogging Sites. *GuruGrounds*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from www.gurugrounds.com/uncategorized/top-10-microblogging-sites/
- Tsukayama, H. (2013, March 21). Twitter turns 7: Users send over 400 million tweets per day. *Washington Post*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-21/business/37889387_1_tweets-jack-dorsey-twitter
- Twitter - The fastest, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about. (n.d.). *Twitter*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <https://twitter.com/about>

Twitter now the fastest growing social platform in the world. (2013, January 28). *Global Web Index*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://www.globalwebindex.net/twitter-now-the-fastest-growing-social-platform-in-the-world/>

Walker, L. (2011). Twitter language - Twitter terms and Twitter words explained. *About.com*. Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://personalweb.about.com/od/twitterterms/a/Twitter-Language.htm>

Witkemper, C., Lim, C. H., & Waldburger, A. (2012). Social media and sports marketing: Examining the motivations and constraints of twitter users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21(3), 170-183. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1324536399?accountid=10920>