

Social Network Sites and Football: Key issues for football club marketers

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Abstract

Academic research into Social Network Sites has witnessed a flurry of activity with the agenda, context and definitions rapidly evolving. Football clubs are greatly concerned with the glut of unofficial sites and fan attention being deflected away from official sources. This research aims to investigate the impact of social network sites on customer relationships in football, in an age when fans are increasingly empowered. Using qualitative research, a comparative study will evaluate the nature of official and unofficial social network sites affiliated with UK football clubs. The study will draw on relationship marketing theory as the framework for pulling together appropriate theories from social network sites, virtual communities of consumption and tribalism. It is intended to add value to the academic debate and contribute to the strategic marketing of football and sport clubs seeking to incorporate social network sites into their business model.

Keywords

Football, social network sites, virtual communities, tribalism, relationship marketing

Introduction

Understanding the complexities of Web 2.0 is a real challenge for marketers who are required to persuade customers via communication (Mitchell, 2008). Fields within Web 2.0 are attracting considerable academic debate (Beer, 2008; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Kozinets, 1999; Stroud, 2008) with Social Network Sites (SNS) a particularly lively discussion. For practitioners the picture is similar. In football, UK clubs are very concerned about the plethora of unofficial sites taking traffic away from official sites and consequently diluting club marketing messages. The potential impact on relationship marketing activity is a worry.

The Premier League National Fan Survey (Premier League, 2008) and Premier League Survey (Centre for the Sociology of Sport, 2001) suggest the football fan base continues to evolve, with new fans from higher social classes resulting in more demographic diversity. Marketers ought to beware: The often misguided assumption that all football fans are totally loyal to their club has been highlighted previously (Tapp, 2004). Conversely the field of SNS and virtual communities offers astute football marketers a tremendous reward if they are able to strike the right balance between club propaganda and customer power.

Football as a business

UK Premier League clubs in 2006/07 achieved average revenues in excess of £75m for the first time (Deloitte, 2008). This is considerable growth when compared to average revenues of £20-£30m in 1999. A truer picture though is shown when comparing the 'big four' (Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United) who have average revenues of £178m while the other Premier League clubs average revenues were £50m. By comparison average 2006/07 revenues for individual clubs in other English divisions were: Championship; £102m, League 1; £63m, League 2 (Deloitte, 2008). Despite overall growth many clubs through the divisions cannot or do not run a marketing department, hence marketing activity will be performed by staff in one or a mix of other functions such as commercial, retail, operations.

Research Context and Objectives

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A problem for the new generation of Internet sites is lack of consistent and academically accepted definitions or systematic research (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Recently, the question of what is the best way for marketers to react to the threats and opportunities of social networking has been posed (Stroud, 2008).

This is a problem UK football clubs have been wrestling with for over 2 years (Bhatti, 2008; Needham, 2008). The upsurge in unofficial sites, where content cannot be controlled, has led to marketers of clubs across all divisions to be worried they may miss out altogether by failing to provide a social network for their fans. When discussed further, the real issue was that the model of a club website merely providing a blog is now recognised as contributing to the fan 'information flow' to unofficial blogs and other sites.

In addition to the online marketing dilemma, other research underpins the need for sectors such as sport to be academically examined in an individual manner (Hunt *et al*, 1999; Parker and Stuart, 1997, Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

This study therefore aims to explore the impact of SNS on the relationship marketing between football clubs and fans. This will be achieved by the following objectives:

1. Exploring the nature of SNS associated with UK football clubs, drawing on the field of SNS and Kozinets' theoretical framework of E-Tribalized marketing (Kozinets, 1999).
2. Developing understanding into how online marketers may link the theoretical concepts and approaches of Latin tribalism and Northern relationship marketing in a sporting context.
3. Proposing strategic approaches football club marketers could adopt in order to foster relationships with SNS users.

Research in the context of football and SNS is very limited. Many approaches for marketing to football supporters have been suggested, varying depending on their theoretical stance. This literature review will cover the following 4 key elements: SNS, Virtual Communities of Consumption, Tribalism, Database and Relationship Marketing.

Social Network Sites

Demonstrating the many viewpoints on social networking depending on the perspective held, Stroud suggested using a series of building blocks based around 'social networking' functionality. However these building blocks were derived from a definitive paper (boyd and Ellison, 2008) that sought to make a distinction between the very term 'networking' and 'network'. It was argued that networking was a potentially confusing term in its emphasis, so 'network' should be used.

boyd and Ellison proposed SNS as a broader term to incorporate the wider variety of sites the discussion could include. This appears to reflect the increasing use of SNS as a generic term for sites that include more functionality as they partner with other providers. Indeed a provocative response has already been written which seeks to develop the SNS debate further by discussing the definitions and theories developed (Beer, 2008).

With the academic definition a source of ongoing debate, it is perhaps appropriate at this stage to use a more practical definition (Wikipedia, 2008) of SNS as: "A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for

users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services.”

It could be argued that the widening emphasis of the SNS debate is becoming closely related to the field of ‘Virtual Communities of Consumption’.

Virtual Communities of Consumption

Defined as “a specific group of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption-related interests” (Kozinets, 1999: 254). Kozinets surmised it is important that marketers do not try to control information flow, rather to follow, understand and work with it. That this could lead to more genuine consumer engagement is the real opportunity. Research suggests the group rather than the product must be the object of nurturance for virtual community builders (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

Empowering consumers is crucial to online relationships (Thorbjornsen *et al.* 2002). The concept of ‘customer community leadership’ has been proposed (Rowley *et al.* 2007) with the customer being viewed as a partner. Virtual space was a key element in enhancing community member experience.

The importance of the internet for football club supporters was highlighted, with the proposition that it was certain to have a sustained impact as a forum for fan power (Auty, 2002). The key is to engage. Sports consumers have extremely high involvement with the product (Mullin *et al.* 2007), however the old link of club and the community is seen as being in danger of breaking down (Chadwick *et al.* 2008).

Kozinets proposed that ‘retribalized’ virtual communities of consumption require a newer framework for traditional relationship marketing theory. It is therefore important at this stage to provide a brief overview of ‘tribalism’.

Tribalism

The potential of tribalism and the linking value has been developed (Cova, 1997). A tribe is defined as “a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates;” (Cova and Cova 2002: 602). With football supporters the link is the club (Dionisio *et al.* 2008).

The Internet has only served to increase the potential of tribalism. E-tribes empower people to “gather together in groups based on a wide range of cultural and subcultural interests and social affiliations” (Kozinets, 1999: 253). It is important to note that tribal communities are argued to be less explicitly commercial than brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

It has long been suggested that the western world in particular operates in a network society (Castells, 2000). The leitmotif of societing – the link is more important than the thing - is central to tribalism. Shared passion and experience are certainly advantages that football clubs have. Crucially, tribalism encourages dialogue in many directions and combinations; Business to Consumer (B2C), Customer to Business (C2B) and Consumer to Consumer (C2C).

Considering the suggestions made by Kozinets, combined with the changing dialogue patterns, how has relationship marketing theory evolved in the context of football?

Database & Relationship Marketing

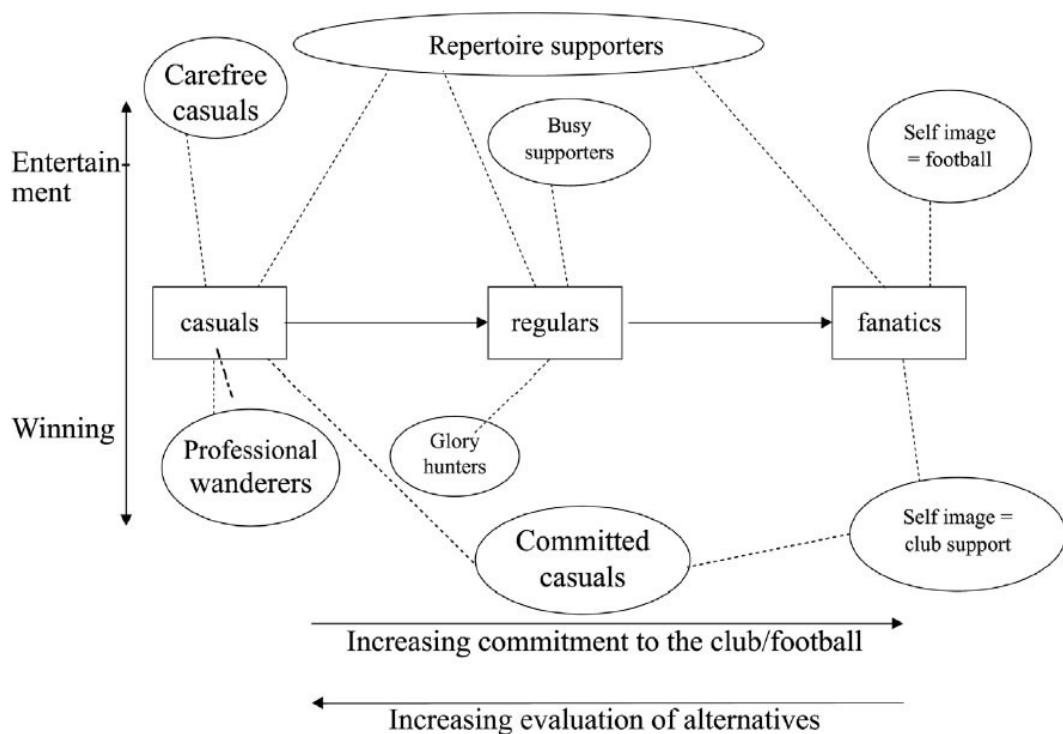
Given the stated aim of this research, relationship marketing theory is paramount to
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 reviewing the impact of SNS.

The uncovering of a belief system being closer to concepts like self image, community belonging was stressed (Tapp, 2004). It was accepted that football is seen as tribal and competitive.

For UK football in particular research has focused on segmentation of supporters in order to better inform marketers in football, sport and leisure-related sectors (Tapp and Clowes, 2002). This was informed by the findings that genuine segmentation is seldom applied (Dibb and Simkin, 1997). In the case of football, a two-stage research strategy resulted in segmentation linking supporters into one framework as shown in Figure 1 below. Levels of attitudinal loyalty, previously neglected by much academic research into football, were also considered.

Figure 1
Linking together sub groups of “casuals”, “regular” and “fanatic” supporters



Source: Tapp and Clowes, 2002: 1266.

However for football marketers operating within a ‘top down’ B2C marketing environment within the relationship marketing context, segmentation still tends to be driven by: Buyer behaviour; Geodemographic data; Channel behaviour, e.g. Internet, ticket office. This is despite the significant insight provided by classification of sports and football fans, in respect of fan behaviour, loyalty and segmentation (Beech *et al.* 2000; Hunt *et al.*, 1999; Kwon and Armstrong, 2002; Parker and Stuart, 1997; Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Tapp, 2004).

It was identified that the football industry lagged behind others in implementing CRM techniques. Thus a framework for ‘Fan Relationship Management’ (FRM) was developed (Adamson *et al.* 2005). A fundamental recognition of this framework was that “fans need to be treated like customers but recognised as being fans” (Adamson *et al.* 2005: 168).. However as the investigation showed some club employees viewed fans as ‘enemy’. CRM tools were being used to sell directly with relationship

Social Network Sites and football marketing being only superficial.

This may be explained in part by short-termism in an environment where from League 1 down “managing the club’s financial position remains a challenge from one season to the next” (Deloitte, 2008). Moreover, the difference between Premiership survival and relegation is circa £35m in lost revenue (The Sunday Times, 2008).

Research uncovered some interesting findings that supporter attitudes were more complex than previous research would indicate. It was highlighted that more complex sub-groups lay behind the supporter masses and more research was therefore required. (Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

In conclusion, the relationship marketing literature does not genuinely answer the question of *why* fans are loyal, i.e. the cultural aspects that offer a much richer view than simply actual sales figures and some attitudinal research. Database marketing is therefore argued to be limited in its binodal view (Kozinets, 1999).

Proposed Research Methods

A qualitative and comparative study will be adopted. An official club website will be critically evaluated in comparison to 2 of the major unofficial SNS, as will the unofficial SNS of a club with no official user generated content aside from a blog.

A critical inquiry will be adopted drawing on Virtual Communities of Consumption theory (Kozinets, 1999). The research will critically analyse the relationship marketing problems facing football clubs and how they respond to emboldened fans who increasingly feel discontented with their club (The Times, 2008).

Online marketers from 2 football clubs will be interviewed. These will be accessed due to the researcher having over 5 years first-hand experience of working in the football sector. A checklist of topics associated with SNS for football fans will be used, as opposed to formal questions in order to gain the best insight.

Timetable of Research / Work Plan

Research is expected to be conducted in 5 key stages:

Stage 1 (1 month):

Initial literature review completion, focusing on preliminary survey and critical appraisal of the literature related to the impact of SNS on football club-fan relationships.

Stage 2 (3 months):

Identification of the nature of the selected football fan SNS investigated and classification of them (addressing research objective 1).

Stage 3 (3 months):

Evaluating the role played by SNS members and how this impacts on fan behaviour (addressing research objective 1).

Stage 4 (6 months):

Begin process of theoretical application for approach to virtual community marketing in football (addressing research objective 2). Ongoing critical review of selected SNS, interviews of football club marketers, identifying past, current and future impact of SNS on their business (addressing research objective 1).

Stage 5 (8 months):

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Interpretation of SNS as evaluated in stages 1-4. Application of theoretical development, leading to proposed strategic approaches for football club marketers dealing with SNS in addition to further research requirements. Addressing research objectives 3 and overall research aims.

Contribution to Knowledge

Research into customer communities that exist in virtual space has been suggested (Rowley *et al.* 2007). Empirical research highlighted key requirements for successful digital publishing are quality content and truly understanding customers (Deloitte & Touche, 2006).

This work will enhance understanding of how a relatively unknown media can be developed to the mutual benefit of football clubs, fans and members. It will extend the literature on SNS by bringing together theories from virtual communities, community leadership, tribalism and relationship marketing.

The potential power of the internet to market to supporters, especially distant ones has been highlighted; with the internet and football information services a core theme (Green, 1999). The comparative study in this area will add another dimension to football and sport marketing academia.

This work is also important to football, sport and leisure practitioners concerned with meeting customer needs via SNS, empowering fans and organisation alike in the process.

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