Recruitment and Retention: Social Media as a Marketing Communication Tool for University Sport Management Programs

Erin McNary, Maryville University

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Social media continues to be used as a communication tool for universities, sport businesses, sport teams, and athletes as a vehicle to promote their brands. Social media includes but is not limited to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Amy Martin, a marketing executive and social media consultant at Digital Royalty, finds social media unique because as a "two-way communication channel, now more than ever consumers, audiences, and fans can interact directly with their favorite brands and celebrities" (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012, p. 397). Furthermore, Street and Smith's Sports Business Journal states the importance of social media as an "effective tool to boost fan interaction, forge connections between teams and leagues and their fans, sell tickets and merchandise, and help drive TV viewership" (Fisher, 2011, p. 14). In an article discussing social media strategies among small businesses, the author argues that silence is no longer an option, and if companies are not a part of the social media world, they risk losing customers (McNicholas, 2011).

In academia, 'customers' are students. According to Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (Brenner, 2013), 89% of internet users 18-29 are more likely to use any kind of social networking site (SNS). Most universities now use an SNS like Facebook or Twitter to market themselves and increase engagement among current and prospective students, as well as alumni. However, social media campaigns may have negative impacts if not executed properly (Pidaparthy, 2011). If the content is not live, poorly maintained, or not updated frequently, or pales in comparison to competitors, this leads to failed marketing efforts. In a study examining the potential of social media as instruments of higher education marketing, Constantinides and Stagno (2011) suggest that university recruiters need to proactively involve social media in their promotional mix while understanding how students use these tools while also noting "that the customer is a powerful partner in the social relationship" (p. 21).

To date, there has been limited research conducted regarding the role of social media as a marketing and communication tool within institutions of higher education. Of those scholars who have examined this area, Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) analyzed the public relations functions of social media within the university setting by conducting in-depth interviews with communication professionals at U.S. universities. Their results indicated that those working within the admissions and recruiting departments of universities tended to believe that social media could create "meaningful connections with their publics" (p. 119). Meanwhile, those within individual academic units were more skeptical about the potential benefits of social media use. Similarly, Greenwood (2012) examined the effectiveness of social media use by 100 of the top-ranked U.S. universities, and found that 92% of these institutions utilized SNS in addition to their university websites. Greenwood (2012) concluded, "Institutions not taking advantage of the free SNS available are not only missing out on marketing and recruiting opportunities, but are lagging behind their competitors" (p. 27).

Despite some inquiry into the social media use of college and universities, there has been no research specific to the application of social media tactics within the sport management discipline. Because the 18-29 demographic comprises a vast majority of college aged students, combined with the increasingly competitive higher education environment, it is important to note how sport management programs are reaching out to this demographic through social media channels. For example, what are the benefits and drawbacks to such social media use? Do programs achieve a return on their investment? How do sport management academicians best manage social media campaigns to represent their programs in the most positive light possible?

Establishing a unique identity through social media marketing may be of great use to sport management programs. If sport businesses and athletes can further connect with their constituents using social media, the same may hold true for the promotion of specific programs such as sport management. Beyond using social media in the macro-university setting, individual academic disciplines and programs such as sport management may want to consider using social media to connect and engage with prospective and current students for recruitment and retention efforts. Most institutions offering sport management programs aim to recruit and retain students who align with

program missions and goals. Since there are hundreds of sport management programs around the globe, a variety of communication tools are necessary to educate potential and current students on the values of a program.

This exploratory study will utilize an online survey methodology in order to address the use of SNS to promote sport management programs. Specific goals of this research include uncovering how sport management programs use social media, what goals they hope to achieve with their social media use, how students perceive these efforts, and what impact social media played in students' choice of a university sport management program. Prior to the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) Conference, two online surveys will be distributed to all active NASSM ListServ members. Two online surveys, one designed for sport management faculty and program directors, and one for current sport management students, will be distributed. NASSM members will be asked to distribute the survey to current sport management students. Understanding both faculty and student perspectives will better allow the researchers to assess whether the goals and objectives of the content creators align with the needs and wants of the students. Quantitative data will be analyzed using SPSS statistical software and qualitative data from open-ended response questions will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Along with the findings, the implications of this research for sport management researchers, academic faculty members, current students, and potential students will be addressed in the presentation. The findings will provide unique perspectives on how or if university sport management programs should creatively market and promote their programs through social media.

References

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