Meeting Relationship-Marketing Goals Through Social Media: A Conceptual Model for Sport Marketers

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Sport industry marketers have long understood the importance of nurturing customer relationships. The new challenge is how best to face the shifts in customer relationship marketing posed by sports organizations and proactive consumers, or "prosumers." In this article, the elements of the relationship-building process are presented with a focus on communication, interaction, and value, concepts identified in Gronroos's (2004) relationship-marketing process model. An expanded version of Gronroos's model is developed to include prosumers and to describe the interactions that occur through social-media exchanges. The value of specific social-media tools and Web 2.0 technologies in helping sport marketers meet their relationship-marketing goals is also discussed. Finally, directions for future research employing the expanded model are suggested.

**Keywords:** sport marketing, Web 2.0, prosumer, digital media

Relationship marketing was described as a paradigm shift in the mid-1990s and has continued to evolve in a range of different business environments (Gronroos, 2004). During this time, consumers' expectations have changed. Tapscott (2009) discussed the fact that "net-generation" consumers have been immersed in technology and two-way communications since birth and expect businesses to engage with them and embrace relationships. Today's sport marketers operate in an environment where consumers of all demographic groups are increasingly literate with social media and have significant advancements in technology at their fingertips (Meadows-Klue, 2008). This situation presents opportunities and challenges for marketers, who must adopt new approaches and take advantage of social media such as blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators. Social media can be defined as the tools, platforms, and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others. Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share, and improve (Bradley, 2010).
The emergence of social media and Web 2.0 technologies has the potential to significantly affect connections with customers (now often characterized as “prosumers”) and provide new directions and benefits in relationship marketing (Griffiths, 2008; Haverstein, 2008). The concept of prosumers was introduced by Toffler (1984), who proposed that the functions of producers and consumers would blend to a point where individuals would be involved in designing and manufacturing products. In this context, the consumer is no longer a passive recipient but seeks active engagement, including opportunities to customize and personalize products as part of the economic exchange process. According to Tapscott (2009), today’s prosumers are actively using Web 2.0 technologies to engage in increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with organizations.

Many sports organizations have embraced relationship-marketing approaches (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lapi & Speter, 2000; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008) and recognized that their consumers are highly involved “with a desire for long-term association with a team sport” (Shani, 1997, p. 9). The potential value and benefits of using social media to meet relationship-marketing goals is significant, and in an environment such as sport it may be particularly relevant in supporting consumers as they become active contributors. As sports organizations rely on repeat purchases of tickets and promotional merchandise and seek to retain loyal consumers, strategic relationship-marketing practices that strengthen these behaviors may have the potential to provide significant competitive advantages.

In this article, the elements of the relationship-building process are presented with a focus on communication, interaction, and value, concepts identified in Gronroos’s (2004) relationship-marketing process model. An expanded version of Gronroos’s model is developed to include prosumers and describe the interactions that occur through social-media exchanges. The value of specific social-media tools and Web 2.0 technologies in helping sport marketers meet their relationship-marketing goals is also discussed. Finally, directions for future research employing the expanded model are suggested.

**Relationship-Marketing Process**

The goals of relationship marketing are to build long-term relationships with the organization’s best customers, generating further business and ultimately profit. It is also designed to contribute to strengthening brand awareness, increase understanding of consumer needs, enhance loyalty, and provide additional value for consumers (Stavros et al., 2008). The relationship-marketing approach was first introduced by Berry (1983) in the service marketing field and is now considered part of contemporary marketing practice. Relationship marketing emphasizes the retention and development of existing customers and highlights the mutual benefits that arise (Copulsky & Wolf, 1990). Gummesson (1999) discussed relationship marketing and stressed the importance of interactions, relationships, and networks as three central components of the process. Gronroos (2004) further defined relationship marketing as “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, so that the objectives of all parties are met” (p. 101). As marketing practice has continued to evolve, there has also been increased recognition of service-oriented approaches in which “intangibility, exchange processes and relationships are
central” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 2). Vargo and Lusch also suggested that consumers be acknowledged as active participants and coproducers in this process. In 2009, Deighton and Kornfeld (2009) considered a model of consumer empowerment in which digital media were used to support a variety of customer interactions and relationships. Consumers were again recognized as proactive communicators, which differed from the passivity displayed by mass-media audiences.

Gronroos (2004) presented relationship marketing as an integrative process requiring three key elements: communication, interaction, and value. Focused attention, incorporating each component strategically, allows marketers to develop effective long-term relationships with customers. Communication is a basic element in any integrated marketing communications plan; however, integrated marketing communication plans typically focus on consistency of messaging but often lack emphasis on the development of lasting relationships and value orientation. Relationship marketing is supported by integrated marketing communication activity and relies on planned messages to assist in the process of establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships. Two-way, or even multiway, communications are used to provide opportunities for customers to interact and express their needs to the organization. The planned communications in relationship marketing often emphasize messaging provided through traditional marketing activities such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and personal selling. Duncan and Moriarty (1997) suggested that additional sources of communication should be considered in relationship building: for example, service messages (e.g., contact with sales staff) and unplanned messages (e.g., team-related chat rooms). Consumers interact with different types of messages continually throughout a relationship, and messaging can originate with either party. Interactions are considered central to the relationship-marketing process (Gronroos, 2004). Interactions occur through both direct and indirect channels, which combine to create a consumer experience. Holmlund (1997) proposed four levels of interaction in developing ongoing relationships. The process begins with small interactions (or acts) such as phone calls or greetings by personnel. Interrelated acts are bound together as episodes aggregating the original interactions. Multiple episodes form sequences, which when combined lead to relationships. A sport-related example could be applied to the interactions of fans with their favorite team beginning with personnel contacts on entering the stadium. A sequence could include concession and merchandise purchases, participation in event-related promotions, and half-time entertainment. The aggregation of interactions during multiple sequences (attendance at additional games) forms the ongoing relationship. Gummesson (1999) recognized that consumers are knowledgeable partners and suggested that collaboration should be proactively encouraged in the interaction process.

According to Collins (1999), marketers must understand consumers’ value system and recognize the role of internal processes. Value judgments based on the worth or importance perceived by consumers is embedded throughout the exchange process. For example, product design elements and organizational processes must be consistently aligned with the needs of consumers. Gronroos (2004) suggested that value is transferred and also created during the interaction process as customers look to fulfill important needs on an ongoing basis. The value process is built on the continued interactions that provide additional worth over time. Gummesson (1999)
also highlighted the importance of opportunities for joint value creation that could be used to create a long-term "win-win" for both parties. Effective management is needed to ensure that the combined effects of planned communication and meaningful interactions lead to value-added outcomes for consumers (Gronroos, 2004).

**Relationship Marketing in the Sport Industry**

Relationship marketing has been used in the sport marketing field in a variety of settings, and a number of sport-specific models have been presented. Shani (1997) suggested that the sport performance element of the industry was most similar to services and would therefore be most likely to benefit from relationship-marketing approaches. Sport consumers were also recognized as "as highly involved consumers with a desire for long-term association with a team sport" (Shani, 1997, p. 9). Shani suggested that sport marketers begin this process by developing segmentation strategies and then move along a continuum, recognizing the role of niche marketing and database marketing in developing a "rich and detailed" (p. 14) platform for relationship marketing.

More recently, an extension of Shani's framework in the context of Australian sport was developed by Stavros et al. (2008). This model highlighted a projected convergence of relationship marketing with the increased sophistication and development of sport marketing practice. Organizational structure, research, and a systematic use of relationship-marketing strategies were highlighted as significant components of this model. Girginov et al. (2009) considered the use of Web sites in relationship-marketing activities of Canadian national sport organizations. They found the promotion of sport participation through Web-based interactions to be lacking in these organizations, particularly in the use of information-gathering and dissemination activities.

Kim (2008) examined the relationship-quality aspect of relationship marketing in a sport context by considering the impact of seven relationship-quality constructs (trust, commitment, satisfaction, love [liking], intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity) on sport-consumption behaviors (media consumption, purchase of licensed merchandise, and attendance). Kim found that relationship quality was a predictor of behavioral outcomes, specifically, that fans who perceived higher levels of relationship quality intended to consume more sport through media, buy more licensed products, and attend more games. The results of this study validated the importance of strong relationships between sports organizations and fans. Furthermore, Kim suggested that team personnel should recognize relationship building throughout organizational decision making.

Bee and Kahle (2006) presented a functional approach to understanding how and why sport consumers engage in relationship marketing. They stated that "relationships that are internalized and based on shared values have the deepest level of influence and are most durable and consistent" (p. 109). Other researchers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lapio & Speter, 2000) have examined the use of relationship-marketing strategies in specific sports settings. Harris and Ogbonna examined the dynamics of relationship-marketing strategies used in the English Premier League and highlighted the different relational status of fans. Lapio and Speter discussed the successful implementation of relationship marketing by NASCAR. The impact
of technology for sport marketers has also been explored on a limited basis. Glad- den (1996) highlighted activities such as the use of Internet-based contests in an attempt to enrich customer databases. Greenwell and Andrew (2006) examined communication preferences of baseball consumers and suggested that organizations embrace the potential of viral marketing, electronic word of mouth, social networking, and blogging. More focused research is just beginning to emerge that addresses the explosion of social-media tools using Web 2.0 technologies.

**Opportunities for Social-Media Tools in the Sport Industry**

Collaborative, user-friendly social-media tools are based on what is known as Web 2.0 technologies. The term Web 2.0, coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005), has been defined as “a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes” (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008, p. 252). The key characteristics of Web 2.0 are that (a) the Web itself becomes the platform and is based on using open standards, decentralization, and Internet protocols (e.g., XML, HTML, SOAP, AJAX); (b) the Web is used to harness the collective intelligence of its users, also known as the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004); (c) data and, in context, content, represent the value rather than hardware or software; (d) users become developers; (e) a business model for software development emphasizes open platforms and shareability; (f) applications are seamlessly deployed over any type of device (e.g., PC, mobile phone); and (g) there is a rich user experience facilitated by technologies for animation, visualization, and interaction (O'Reilly, 2005).

Informal user networks supported by interactive applications allow consumers to play a central role in producing, designing, publishing, or editing content and together create a dynamic and interactive environment (Krishnamurthy & Dou, 2008). Constantinides and Fountain (2008) classified Web 2.0 tools and technologies into five main categories: blogs, social networks, content communities (e.g., YouTube), forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators (e.g., RSS feeds). The increased availability of simple-to-use technologies helps consumers create content on their own terms, with or without official involvement on the corporate level (Anderson, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). Web 2.0 tools can be used to provide a rich environment for relationship marketing with significant opportunities based on their capacity to expand communication, embrace consumers’ diversity and self-expression, and allow open “conversations in the marketplace” (Meadows-Klue, 2008, p. 248).

Sport industry marketing personnel are also considering the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on their operations and customer relationship-building activities and are beginning to assess the power of these tools in directly accessing and communicating with their consumers (Fisher, 2008). The *SportsBusiness Journal* of November 17, 2008, contained a special section that focused on the ability of the industry to understand the potential of Web 2.0 and social media. Sport properties already have presence on social networks such as Facebook and encourage
consumers to join as fans. According to Fisher (2008), teams view their presences on Facebook as a way to strengthen relationships with fans, and as membership continues to grow, further opportunities are likely to emerge. For example, in January 2009, Facebook reported a 276% increase (over a 6-month period) in the number of 35- to 54-year-old users and an overall increase in users of 58.9% (Corbett, 2009). The challenge for the sport industry is to embrace these new tools, strategically manage their social-media presence, and gain greater understanding of the potential value of Web 2.0 tools in meeting relationship-marketing goals.

**Requirements for Participants in the Relationship-Marketing Process**

Until recently, relationship marketing focused on companies’ building a traditional customer base (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Today, prosumers’ behavior has blurred conventional ideas about the role of the consumer. Engaged and empowered consumers with direct access to business organizations expect to be involved in the creation of the next generation of products and services (Tapscott, 2009). Organizations understand the importance of creating connections both online and off-line. The newest relationships to consider are those between sports organizations and prosumers that are facilitated by social media and interactions among the prosumers themselves. The sports organization seeks to use social media to achieve its relationship-marketing goals of brand building and customer loyalty. These relationships are different from those supported by more traditional marketing activities in which the consumer was recruited and retained to support the buyer–seller relationship with the organization. One way this has been characterized is as a “loyalty ladder” (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). The loyalty ladder focused on relationship building from an organization-to-customer (i.e., “end-user”) perspective, from identifying likely customers, turning them into prospects, and once they became customers, nurturing them so they developed into loyal “advocates” (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Prosumers, however, may not be customers of a particular organization but members of the greater online or virtual community on the Internet that serve both as intermediaries or influencers in the relationship process. One of the chief characteristics of prosumers is their use of social media in which the content is generated by peers. Prosumers may be especially influential because of declining trust in traditional sources of information and the popularity of personalized recommendations from peers. Prosumers have received less attention for their role in relationship building, as they influence both the sport organizations and their traditional customers (Mitussis, O’Malley, & Patterson, 2006; Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009).

Table 1 provides more detail about sports organizations and prosumers in terms of their needs for communication, interaction, and value. Sports organizations recognize that social media can enable powerful platforms to reach a wide group of consumers. Organizational needs revolve around engaging prosumers to contribute to the lifetime value of the relationship. For prosumers, social media meet their needs for easy ways to connect with organizations using technology that they use in other areas of their life and promote empowerment.
Table 1 Relationship-Marketing Elements: Communication, Interaction, and Value Among Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Value</th>
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| Sports organizations | • New forms of planned and unplanned messages  
 | • Social media integrated into marketing strategy  
 | • Decreased reliance on traditional media channels | • Support for two-way communication  
 | | • Use of a variety of digital media  
 | | • Contributions of consumers occurring at all stages of product life cycle | • Increased interaction  
 | | | • Recognized importance of consumer participation |
| Prosumers | • User-generated content initiated by current and future customers  
 | | • Direct conversation enabled by reviews, ideas, opinions | • Reliance on dynamic media  
 | | | • Natural platforms for connection and community membership  
 | | | • Creation of collective intelligence | • Increased empowerment  
 | | | | • Recognized third-party influencers, tastemakers, and champions  
 | | | • Allowance for many voices |

Sports Organizations’ Requirements

From a traditional marketing perspective, communication requirements from the sports organization emphasize the control of messaging as part of a planned strategy. Elements of a marketing communication plan, such as the nature and timing of promotions, are still core parts of the marketing strategy. Sports organizations also continue communication through responses to customer inquiries and other forms of traditional customer service. These communications form the basis for ongoing interactions and add value to the company in terms of setting new marketing objectives, reallocation of resources, or more efficiently targeting customer segments. With prosumers the requirements shift because there is less organizational control over the consumer relationship. However, most organizations now recognize that new avenues of communication may lead Internet “spectators” to become customers (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Therefore, communication strategies must include how to launch messages that reach as much of the community as possible. At the same time, a strategy is needed to respond to unplanned messages such as blog posts about the company. To nurture this interaction, the emphasis is on two-way communications using multiple platforms. Organizations may also solicit messages. For example, Mountain Dew let fans plan the Dew Tour by providing input in the design and development process. Fans also have the opportunity to personalize numerous products (posters, sneakers) associated with the tour (Lukowitz, 2010). The potential value for the company is linked to increased interaction and participation with the prosumer.
Prosumers’ Requirements

Prosumers often employ communication technologies outside the usual customer channels (e.g., corporate Weblog) such as independent blog postings, viral videos, and so on and have freedom to engage in direct communications with other consumers. In addition, prosumers frequently seek to reach a broad audience, so channels with social-bookmarking capabilities or blogrolls may provide an increased probability of being found and heard. Their influence and, hence, their value may become directly proportional to the degree of interaction they have both with organizations and with each other. They can also become powerful influences as tastemakers and champions because of the multiple avenues for interaction that social media provide (Tapscott, 2009). A tastemaker or champion could be a widely followed blogger, popular sports figure, or journalist to whom both other consumers and sports organizations pay attention. Social media enable prosumers to develop their own voices in the form of customer reviews, innovative ideas, and opinions. They also are exposed to other voices within the social network that may provide them with additional information. Social media thus add value to their relationship with the sports organization through developing a sense of empowerment. For example, the National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA) tapped into their most passionate advocates and created a comprehensive online strategy. By using a range of social media, the NTRA was able to open direct lines of communication to fans who provided input, often directly to the CEO, on the future direction of the sport (http://www.ntra.com).

Development of an Enhanced Model for the Relationship-Marketing Process

The model in this article is adapted from Gronroos’s (2004) model including interaction, communication, and value in the relationship-marketing process. In the original model, interaction was initiated by an organization through direct communication and through sales events, followed by other mass communication, public relations, and direct-to-consumer activities to which customers reacted. Most of these messages were planned messages or were customer responses related to completing the sales transaction. The direction of the flow was linear, directed by the organization through sequenced interactions in which customers reacted to episodes such as bill payment or shipping—that is, relating to the commercial transaction. Unplanned messages, (e.g., third-party news stories or customer word of mouth) arose from responses to product and service messages coming from the organization and became part of the process. Gronroos also suggested that those positive unplanned messages were the ones that form the interaction (2004, p. 107).

The Gronroos model (2004) assumed that the relationship-building process was initiated by the organization and focused on a planned communications strategy. With prosumers who use social media, this assumption may no longer be valid. Someone posting a blog comment or tweet may have not used the product or service at all but simply formed opinions about it from others and was sharing them regardless of purchase intent. Furthermore, this interaction may not even be positive in nature and could still result in sales. Anderson (2008) provides a
compelling example of a consumer contest to create YouTube ads for the Chevy Tahoe. Among the submissions, many were negative—for example, relating the purchase of an SUV to global warming or social irresponsibility. However, the negative ads had more views than did the positive ads; in some cases, they “drove” viewers to the Chevrolet Web site and even resulted in conversions. This same example underscores the fact that organizations no longer are “in charge” of the interaction and do not always control content of the advertising message.

The new model depicted in Figure 1 presents the interaction between the sports organization and prosumers in a more nonlinear fashion. The arrows in the model represent multiple pathways for two-way communication to occur. From the sports organization to prosumers, communication strategies still include traditional planned communications (e.g., press releases, advertising, e-mail). Because prosumers want direct conversations in the social-media environment, organizations have embraced blogs and social networks as part of planned promotional strategies (e.g., posting short messages on Twitter, establishing a Facebook presence; Tapscott, 2009). Sports organizations also have the opportunity to interact with prosumers on a more informal, unplanned basis (e.g., reactions posted to a third-party social network or to someone’s blog).

Flows from prosumers to the sports organization could include responses to company communications, such as shipment acknowledgments and requests for input into product design, as well as unplanned messages such as posting requests for support, chatting with customer-service representatives, or supplying comments on the organization’s own Web site. In addition to direct communications, prosumers engage in dialogue with other consumers, using social media to convey “word of mouth” messages about the organization to a wide audience. Closing the loop, it may be that prosumers who tweet about a company may in turn be “followed” by an organization seeking to better understand consumer needs by tracking comments or customer reviews. All directions of communication help establish a high degree of interactivity above and beyond the expected company–customer dialog. Value is represented in the center of the model as the lasting output created through this integrative process and shared by the sports organization and prosumers. The expectation is that the combined effects of communication and interaction fulfill customer needs and contribute to the creation of joint value (Gronroos, 2004). For the organization the value may be tangible, such as new market research data mined from the interactions (Gummesson, 1999). This value, however, is predicated on the use of appropriate digital metrics.

Using Web 2.0 Technologies in Sport Industry Relationship Marketing

The application of this model in the sport industry highlights opportunities for organizations to capitalize on developing Web 2.0 technologies to strengthen relationship-marketing approaches. The expanded model’s communication pathways highlight the need for sports organizations to pay attention to and then leverage the relationships they build with prosumers, both as customers and as intermediaries and influencers of purchase decisions. By leveraging Web 2.0 technologies, organizations can also satisfy not only their own requirements identified in Table
1 but also prosumer requirements as producers and consumers (Tapscott, 2009; Toffler, 1984). Proactive use of Web 2.0 tools in engaging customers in direct, personalized, multidimensional communications and interactions adds value and strengthens relationships. Growing numbers of professional sports organizations are using social media to reach fans in dynamic ways.

There are a number of goals in relationship marketing that are especially relevant to the sport industry. In particular, sport organizations seek to build relationships that will enhance fan loyalty to help build the brand (Stavros et al., 2008). Customers, in this case fans, may then become long-term and enthusiastic advocates with whom lasting relationships can be maintained. Other relevant goals for relationship marketers in sport include understanding consumer needs, enhancing the value of the relationship to the customer, and increasing satisfaction, all leading to increased profitability. Table 2 describes the role of blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators in meeting these relationship-marketing goals. Technologies in each Web 2.0 tool can be used to support the model elements of communication, interaction, and value shown in Figure 1.

**Using Blogs in Relationship Marketing**

Organizational blogging activity lends itself to the communication, interaction, and value of the relationship-marketing process. Blogs are typically incorporated in a team Web site or social network and provide natural opportunities for communication and interaction. The NTRA provides an example of a well-developed blogging strategy that has been effective in meeting its relationship-marketing goals and strengthening long-term partnerships with fans. NTRA President and CEO Alex Waltrep maintains a regularly updated blog called Straight Up (http://www.ntra.com), which encourages racing fans to provide feedback and opinions directly to the leadership of the sport. The communications and comments on this blog clearly demonstrate the value of the relationship with the fans and the two-way nature of the dialogue. Customer satisfaction can be increased through these conversations, and the NTRA is able to address goals related to increasing their understanding of consumer needs.

The use of microblogging sites such as Twitter has grown dramatically, and these may also be used to strengthen relationships with fans. Twitter enables sports organizations, coaches, and athletes to provide instant communication to fans who have elected to follow them. Real-time access to team information is provided by both personnel and athletes from a variety of locations (courtside, locker room, boardroom) and allows fans to feel increasingly connected to their favorite teams. The instant nature of these unique interactions offers additional value for the fans. For example, Shaquille O’Neal’s success with almost 2 million followers (http://twitter.com/THE_REAL_SHAQ) highlights the interest levels of fans who adopt this medium to feel close to the action (Fisher, 2009). In early 2009, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell challenged the NFL staff to find new ways to reach fans and build long-term partnerships. As a result, the NFL vice president of corporate communications regularly tweets a behind-the-scenes view of the league and current issues. This platform also allows the NFL to strengthen its brand-building activities in a new environment (Fisher, 2009).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential goals of relationship marketers</th>
<th>Blogs</th>
<th>Social networks</th>
<th>Content communities (e.g., YouTube)</th>
<th>Forums and bulletin boards</th>
<th>Content aggregators (e.g., RSS feeds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase understanding of consumer needs.</td>
<td>Opportunities for direct communication with organizational leadership.</td>
<td>Highly interactive, numerous opportunities for engagement.</td>
<td>Responses to posted content through comments and views.</td>
<td>Two-way potential to drive discussion of current topics.</td>
<td>Continued sharing of information highlights areas of significance to fans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop long-term partnership.</td>
<td>Fan connection increased through dynamic feedback channel.</td>
<td>Membership in “clubs” maintained within social network.</td>
<td>Participation opportunities such as video or photo contests increase interaction with fans.</td>
<td>Status and credibility of frequent or expert posters can be recognized. Ability to contribute to body of knowledge.</td>
<td>Simple way to receive up-to-date communications of content. Opt-in capabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance loyalty.</td>
<td>Importance of fans’ voices recognized.</td>
<td>Fan connections increased through opportunities to contribute content such as video, photos.</td>
<td>Active contributions and posting of content used by fans to demonstrate commitment.</td>
<td>Frequent posters build connections with each other, as well as organization. Commitment enhanced by participating in the conversation.</td>
<td>Output from feeds can be redistributed through social network or blog—becomes part of poster’s contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance value and customer satisfaction.</td>
<td>Fans can personalize and control their relationship with the sport.</td>
<td>Empowers fans and builds community. Real-time connections.</td>
<td>Dynamic nature of content provides fans with new perspectives and access to behind-the-scenes activities.</td>
<td>Real-time conversation with other fans and industry insiders.</td>
<td>Increased access to self-selected information resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand building.</td>
<td>Retweets can be used to spread information on organizational activity.</td>
<td>Proprietary social networks such as Planet Orange provide opportunity for expanded brand recognition.</td>
<td>Mixed-media approaches can be used to reinforce the brand.</td>
<td>Activity builds awareness with brand and brand extensions.</td>
<td>Company-designed content used to enhance brand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using Social Networks in Relationship Marketing

Many teams (e.g., Phoenix Suns, Seattle Seahawks, New York Rangers) have developed robust, branded social-networking sites. Social networks provide fans with a range of features that are built around opportunities for engagement and allow the team to boost fan loyalty, a key relationship-marketing goal. Social networks also support the relationship-marketing process by supporting communication such as sharing opinions and reactions, contributing content through embedded applications that allow video and photo sharing, or even by embedding external widgets (small applications with dynamic content such as counters, MP3 players, etc.) into a social-network page. These mechanisms allow the team to increase its understanding of customer needs and strengthen long-term partnerships. The Phoenix Suns’ Emmy-Award-winning social network, Planet Orange (http://www.nba.com/suns/fans/planet_orange.html), empowers fans through numerous
interaction opportunities that provide and create joint value. Digital-media managers and marketing staff incorporate a variety of strategies, use varied technologies, and provide added value through a range of promotional strategies. Planet Orange members receive exclusive benefits such as invitations to behind-the-scenes events and opportunities to meet other Planet Orange members in person at selected home games. Fan interactions through opportunities to contribute content also lead to increased loyalty to the team.

**Using Content Communities in Relationship Marketing**

Content communities such as YouTube and Flikr provide a variety of interaction options for fans that add value by allowing them to personalize and control their relationship with the team or sport. Access to content communities can be increased by embedding these tools in traditional Web sites or social networks. For example, the Boston Celtics YouTube channel (http://www.youtube.com/user/bostonceltics), a channel sponsored by the team, allows fans access to unique video content and provides new opportunities to enhance loyalty and brand building. Fans can subscribe to the YouTube channel and participate in discussions related to the video content. Fans’ ability to be involved in the creation of content is particularly relevant to relationship marketing because it provides a natural forum for increasing interaction and peer-to-peer participation. Fans can upload video or photo content that demonstrates their relationship with the team and places them in the center of the communication process. In addition, the potential of two-way communication between fans and their favorite team provides further opportunities to develop partnerships and increase understanding of consumer needs.

**Using Forums and Bulletin Boards in Relationship Marketing**

As with social networks and content communities, message boards and forums provide increased value based on the opportunities for fans to communicate and interact with each other. These tools provide the opportunity for sports teams to meet goals related to increasing their understanding of consumer needs, enhancing loyalty, and strengthening long-term partnerships. For example, the New York Giants Fan Zone (http://boards.giants.com/) includes message boards that allow fans to share their thoughts on a range of topics. Fans can easily join the conversation on topics related to a variety of team activities and by doing so demonstrate their commitment to the team. Frequent contributors are often rated by other users and establish credibility in the community. This kind of user-generated content also provides value to teams in term of feedback and allows fans to feel empowered in sharing their “voices.”

**Using Content Aggregators in Relationship Marketing**

Content aggregation includes tools to manage, summarize, and deliver content of interest to users. Probably the most widely recognized aggregation tool is RSS (real simple syndication), which is used to create news feeds. An example from Major League Baseball is a Web page that provides links to RSS feeds for news from each team (http://mlb.mlb.com/news/rss/index.jsp). Providing consumers with the ability to generate their own feeds can meet organizational goals of increasing customer
satisfaction and enhancing loyalty by providing a way to personalize content and provide instant notification when content has changed. If sports organizations can analyze the news items that are selected, content aggregators can also be helpful in meeting the objective of understanding consumer needs.

The use of content aggregators may enhance the value of the relationship-building process. For many consumers, receiving relevant content may be an end in itself, but others may share the output from their feeds by attaching them to blog posts or social-networking pages. In addition, they may create mash-ups, linking the content to other Web content, for example, combining Google maps with an RSS feed about a team’s schedule. Sport marketers should ensure that content aggregation is easy to do and prominently featured on their digital platforms.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Sports organizations already recognize the benefits of long-term relationships with their consumers and are now considering the strategic value of social media. In this article we adapted Gronroos’s relationship-marketing model (2004) to include the use of Web 2.0 tools in the sport industry. In particular, the impact of the prosumer community on the relationship-marketing process was acknowledged. Communication, interaction, and value were emphasized in the model, and examples were provided to demonstrate the effectiveness of Web 2.0 technologies in meeting a variety of relationship-marketing goals. As professional sports teams take advantage of the “highly involved nature” of their fans (Shani, 1997), the use of social media provides new opportunities to gain maximum leverage in strengthening and building long-term relationships.

The model presented highlights the importance of social media in the relationship-marketing process and recognizes consumers as increasingly knowledgeable partners and collaborators in the process (i.e., as prosumers). The model also supports that notion that varied sources of messaging and content in the Web 2.0 environment may be needed to reach different types of consumers. Research is required to investigate the needs of a variety of prosumer subgroups and to consider the value and effectiveness of specific Web 2.0 technologies in meeting those needs. In addition, greater understanding is needed relating to the willingness and/or readiness of consumers to become active participants in social media. The potential for new or improved digital revenue streams should also be considered. For example, the increased potential to improve relationships with “occasional” sport consumers may be used to increase sales of team merchandise though Internet portals embedded in social networks.

Previous research in relationship marketing included discussion of the use of technology to develop and manage detailed customer databases for use in relationship building (Gladden, 1996; Meadows-Klue, 2008; Stavros et al., 2008). A benefit of many Web 2.0 technologies is the availability and potential use of embedded tracking and data-collection tools. Tools that require membership information can be used to increase access to users’ demographic and psychographic characteristics. Levels of interaction can also be evaluated to identify and categorize different types of fans and may provide a basis for future segmentation strategies. Data collection should also be linked to the evaluation of the success of different tools in meeting specific goals.
Given the dynamic nature of the Web 2.0 environment, additional tools are constantly being developed. Mobile technologies such as smart phones with Internet connectivity have become interchangeable with computers. In addition, mobile applications for sport and social networking are proliferating on a regular basis. Increased opportunities for personalized and instant communication continue to develop and allow consumers to be connected at all times. The challenge for sport marketers is the continued assessment and adoption of the technologies that best enhance the relationship-marketing process. Which tools will be meaningful in continuing to build relationships? It is likely that service-focused tools that are simple and easy to use will encourage the highest level of participation and interaction. The sport industry has embraced social media and appears to be moving in a direction where organizational commitment to them is more widely acknowledged. Industry meetings have focused on sharing best practices in implementation, brand building, and potential revenue generation. Teams and leagues have also hired digital-media specialists to manage these operations. Sports fans stated their position some time ago by becoming consumers, adopting new technologies as part of their lives, and creating a strong voice in interacting with their favorite teams. Gronroos (2004) and Stavros et al. (2008) emphasized the need for an integrative relationship-marketing process embedded in the culture of the organization. As sport marketers capitalize on social media in meeting relationship-marketing goals, it is important to ensure that these tools are integrated and build meaningful relationships through opportunities for communication, interaction, and value.

References


