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# Social Media and Professional Sports: An analysis of the National Basketball Association and National Football League teams' strategies

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROFESSIONAL SPORTS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL  
BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION AND NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE TEAMS'  
STRATEGIES

by

Anthony D Zinn Jr.

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Method .....	5
Results.....	6
Discussion.....	12
References.....	15
Vita.....	16

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 .....	9
Table 2 .....	10

## **Introduction**

The progression and development of media technology have dramatically affected the way people, groups and companies communicate with one another. Mass media outlets such as radio, television and Internet are among the more popular media outlets that are used to communicate with a large audience. However in recent years social media have become the main media outlet in reaching and communicating with large audiences. Today, social media outlets are utilized by millions of people and businesses across the world.

Social media have specifically influenced professional sports teams and sports fans, changing the way professional sports leagues communicate and stay connected with sports fans worldwide. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter have given professional sports teams the opportunity to increase brand awareness and fan engagement. For sports fans, social media have become the outlet to stay connected constantly with their favorite sports teams and athletes. According to *Sports Fans 2.0* by David M. Sutera, “Twitter alone has more than 100 million active users worldwide, generating close to 230 million Tweets per day.”

Numerous professional sports leagues, such as the Major League Baseball, National Hockey League and Women’s National Basketball Association have invested in social media platforms to stay connected with fans. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to specifically examine the social media strategies utilized by professional sports teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL). The NBA and NFL are two professional sports leagues that have fully integrated social media into their overall business plan, which is why I chose to analyze these two professional sports leagues. The NBA’s professional Facebook and Twitter pages have 20.1 billion likes and 9.4 million followers respectively. The NFL’s professional Facebook and Twitter pages have 9.4 million likes and 5.9

million followers (Jessell, 2014). Both leagues have been able to utilize social media exceptionally well to build relationships with fans and spectators from across the world.

This study will include interviews with employees from NBA and NFL teams. I will specifically seek to interview employees that manage the teams' social media platforms. In addition I will conduct a content analysis of the NBA and NFL teams Facebook and Twitter accounts.

### **Literature Review**

*In Sports Fans 2.0*, David Sutera stated that all sports organizations realize the importance of social media. Social media allow sports teams to attract large numbers of viewers that are hard to reach (Sutera, 2013). In addition, social media allow for sports teams to track the online activity of sports fans. This benefits the sports teams because they are able to better understand their consumers (Sutera, 2013). Sutera, also explains that sports stadiums and arenas now offer web access during live sporting events. This gives fans the opportunity to utilize their social media sites to share statuses, tweets, photos, etc.

Many sports stadiums in the United States, as well as worldwide, now offer fans several new social media applications that help simulate the home viewing experience. These new social features are the first of many innovative designs that both sports teams and internet providers will offer to sports fans in an attempt to lure them away from the comfort of their own homes to the experience the event at the live sporting venue (Sutera, 2013).

In the study titled, *It's a whole new ballgame* by Jimmy Sanderson, the author argued that there are often many challenges that arise due to social media, particularly managing the content information (Sanderson, 2011). "Social media increased the chances of confidential data to be revealed. Social media messages can be transmitted from any location where a person has

Internet access, extending the possibility for information breaches well beyond the physical confines of the workplace” (Sanderson, 2011 p. 42). In addition, social media allow for athletes or fans to express displeasure with sports teams’ decisions. Sanderson (2011) stated that some sport organizations prevent employees from using social media within the workplace to eliminate any future problems social media could bring. Many organizations have adopted policies to monitor and control the use of social media within the workplace. (Sanderson, 2011 p. 43).

In a research study conducted by Mya, Mark and Matthew (2012) the authors found that the primary reasons why professional sports teams utilize social media networks is to enhance relationship building among fans. Particularly, Facebook allows sports fan the ability to communicate and spread information (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Social networking sites allow for professional sport teams to reach an audience that they normally could not reach through traditional media. The reason for this is because majority of social networking sites are free to the subscriber and the most up-to-date information is provided through social media networks (Pronschinske et al., 2012). This research also mentioned additional benefits that social media networks have for professional sports teams and fans such as “disclosing details about the business and aspects of the sports organization engages fans and disseminates information regarding the sport aspects of the organization” (Pronschinske et al., 2012).

According to research conducted by Todd Weiss (2014), NFL teams are trying to enhance in-stadium experience by upgrading wireless capabilities so that fans can connect to Facebook and Twitter to share comments, photos and videos with family and friends as they watch games (Weiss, 2014). NFL CIO Michelle McKenna-Doyle observed that, “There’s an unlimited appetite for great NFL content, and we want to make sure it’s there for them to consume it” (Weiss, 2014). According to the article, two NFL teams, the Philadelphia Eagles and New



England Patriots have improved their Internet Wi-Fi capabilities to allow tens of thousands of fans to connect to their favorite social media sites during games. Todd Weiss further stated that the NFL hopes that more teams improve their Internet Wi-Fi capabilities to improve engagement with their fans (Weiss, 2014). "We find ourselves in the NFL playing a little catch-up," said McKenna-Doyle. "Some have done it. Some are planning it. It's a high priority for the NFL, and recently we have reached some minimum standards for all our teams to meet for Wi-Fi and connectivity. That's why the NFL sought a partner and went with Extreme Networks. If you have real data, you can perform better," (Weiss, 2014).

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has more than 6.7 million combined Facebook fans and Twitter followers according to the website Fan Sports Graph (Sauer, 2010). The articles explain that the NBA allows teams the freedom and opportunity to create and control their own social media platforms and web content however, the leagues have centralized policies that all teams must abide by (Sauer, 2010). "Players are smart and understand the value of social media, and the league has been able to leverage that," says Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban. (Sauer, 2010). Sauer said that NBA's Facebook page has influenced fans to watch more than a billion videos at nba.com, which resulted in a 45% increase over the 2008-2009 seasons. In addition, Facebook has helped increase the rate of television viewers of games (Sauer, 2010).

In an article by Jo and Susan (2009) the authors argue that many sports team such as the Phoenix Suns, Seattle Seahawks and New York Rangers have developed strong social media sites to increase brand awareness. Social media provides numerous features for fans such as engagement with the team, the ability to share your opinion and share videos and photos (Williams & Chinn, p. 433).

This literature review presents an overview and understanding on how social media has influenced the business strategies of professional sports organizations and teams. In addition, this literature explains how social media has influenced the overall communications between sports teams and fans.

This study is intended to understand the social media strategies of NBA and NFL sports teams. It also seeks to analyze how social media improves the fan experience. Overall, this study intends to seek answers to the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What social media platforms are most currently utilized by NBA and NFL teams?
- Research Question 2: How has the use of social media by NBA and NFL teams affected fan engagement?
- Research Question 3: How has the use of social media affected brand awareness for teams in the NBA and NFL?
- Research Question 4: How is social media utilized to enhance the game experience for NBA and NFL fans (within the arena/stadium)?
- Research Question 5: Which NBA and NFL teams have the highest social media likes/followers on Facebook and Twitter?

### **Method**

The data for the current research were collected using the following procedures: (a) Phone and email/phone interviews conducted from a sample of three NBA and two NFL teams. The NBA teams are the Philadelphia 76ers, Sacramento Kings, and Portland Trailblazers. The NFL teams are the New York Jets and Tampa Bay Buccaneers. I specifically interviewed the social media specialists of the NBA and NFL teams. The phone/email interviews consisted of 4

primary questions, conducted over a six-week time frame, between May and June 2015. The data collected were analyzed for similarities and differences on how social media are utilized by the NBA and NFL teams.

In addition, this study conducted a content analysis of the Facebook and Twitter accounts of each NBA and NFL sports teams in this study. The data were analyzed to figure out which NBA and NFL teams have the highest number of likes on Facebook and followers on Twitter.

## **Results**

In this section, the names of the interviewees are deliberately omitted to protect their identities. Six of them are represented by letters A, B, C, D and E. Interviewees A, B and C are the social media specialists for the NBA teams, while D and E are those of the NFL teams interviewed for this project.

### ***National Basketball Association***

According to interviewees A, B, and C, Facebook and Twitter are among the main social media platforms that are used by the NBA teams. Facebook is mainly utilized because it has the largest audience of any social media platform. Interviewees A and B specifically mentioned that Twitter is mainly utilized because NBA players use them to hold conversations and interact with the fans. These responses therefore show that Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly utilized social media platform by NBA teams, and partly provide the answer to research question 1 of this study.

Interviewees A, B and C stated that social media has affected fan engagement/participation for NBA teams because it allows for the fans to feel more involved with the sport; which provides the answer to research question 2.

Social media have also had a tremendous effect on NBA teams brand awareness.

Interviewees A, B and C mentioned that social media affects brand awareness because it allows for engagement with fans. The following statement provides the answer to research question 3 of this study.

Social media is utilized to enhance the game experience for fans within the arena/stadium. Interviewees A and B explained that when fans are watching the game in the arena/stadium, they are able to use social media to tweet and post status about the game and their experiences; this statement provides to answer to research question 4. In addition, according to interviewee B, after every home game, the best tweets and post of the night are reposted and recognized on the official teams social media sites.

Table 1 shows the amount all 30 NBA teams Facebook fans and Twitter followers. According to the data, the Los Angeles Lakers has the most Facebook likes with 21 million likes, followed by the Chicago Bulls with 17 millions likes and the Miami Heat with 15 million likes. When analyzing all 30 NBA teams Twitter accounts, it was found that the Los Angeles Lakers has the most Twitter followers with 4.2 millions followers, followed by the Miami Heat with 3 millions followers and the Chicago Bulls with 2.1 million followers. (Research Question 5)

### ***National Football League***

According to interviewees D and E Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the main social media platforms that are utilized by the NFL. The effects of Facebook are quite huge and noticeable in the sense that it has a huge audience unlike any other social media network. Twitter is used to tweet about news alerts and instant news. Instagram's main features are the ability to be creative and share visuals and photos. The following responses provide the answers to research question 1.

It was explained by interviewees D and E that social media have a significant effect on fan engagement due to the ability that social media have to communicate and engage fans. This statement provides the answer to research question 2. In addition, interviewee D mentioned that because of social media, teams are able to provide immediate engagement with fans and address any issues that fans may have.

Interviewee D indicated that social media has affected NFL teams brand awareness because it allows for the brand to be promoted to fans through mobile devices and it also reinforces brand availability 24/7. In addition, Interviewee E stated that the large social reach that social media offers has affected teams brand awareness. The following two responses offer the answer(s) to research question 3.

According to interviewee D, when fans are at live games, social media allows for fans to comment and share posts about their experience at the game. In addition, Interviewee E explained that when the team has home games, the organization encourages fans to post photos of themselves at the game on Twitter and Facebook. These responses provide the answer(s) to research question 4.

Table 2 is an analysis of all 32 NFL teams Facebook fans and Twitter followers. According to the data that was collected, it was found that the Dallas Cowboys has the most Facebook likes with 7.9 million likes, followed by the New England Patriots with 6 million likes and the Green Bay Packers with 4.9 million likes. When analyzing all NFL teams Twitter accounts, it was found that New England Patriots has the most followers with 1.3 million followers, followed by the Dallas Cowboys with 1.2 million followers and the Pittsburgh Steelers with 956.3 thousand followers (Research Question 5).

**Table 1**

<b><u>NBA Teams</u></b>	<b><u>Facebook Likes</u></b>	<b><u>Twitter Followers</u></b>
1. Atlanta Hawks	1.2 million	364 thousand
2. Boston Celtics	8.4 million	1.6 million
3. Charlotte Hornets	1.3 million	373 thousand
4. Chicago Bulls	17 million	2.1 million
5. Cleveland Cavaliers	3.6 million	752.3 thousand
6. Dallas Mavericks	4.1 million	671.4 thousand
7. Denver Nuggets	1.7 million	387.1 thousand
8. Detroit Pistons	1.4 million	391.6 thousand
9. Golden State Warriors	3.1 million	750.9 thousand
10. Houston Rockets	3 million	713.8 thousand
11. Indiana Pacers	2.9 million	563.9 thousand
12. Los Angeles Clippers	3.2 million	747.9 thousand
13. Los Angeles Lakers	21 million	4.2 million
14. Memphis Grizzlies	1.5 million	412.8 thousand
15. Miami Heat	15 million	3 million
16. Milwaukee Bucks	1 million	337 thousand
17. Minnesota Timberwolves	1.4 million	45.9 thousand
18. Brooklyn Nets	2.5 million	560.5 thousand
19. New Orleans Pelicans	1.3 million	345.1 thousand
20. New York Knicks	5.5 million	1.1 million

21. Oklahoma City Thunder	5.5 million	1 million
22. Orlando Magic	2.5 million	1.2 million
23. Philadelphia 76ers	1.2 million	464.3 thousand
24. Phoenix Suns	1.7 million	417.3 thousand
25. Portland Trailblazers	2 million	451 thousand
26. Sacramento Kings	1.2 million	336 thousand
27. San Antonio Spurs	5.8 million	987.5 thousand
28. Toronto Raptors	3,788	760.8 thousand
29. Utah Jazz	972 thousand	354 thousand
30. Washington Wizards	1.1 million	379.6 thousand

**Table 2**

<u>NFL Teams</u>	<u>Facebook Likes</u>	<u>Twitter Followers</u>
1. Arizona Cardinals	1.1 million	180.3 thousand
2. Atlanta Falcons	1.7 million	470.5 thousand
3. Baltimore Ravens	2.2 million	594.3 thousand
4. Buffalo Bills	724 thousand	357.4 thousand
5. Carolina Panthers	1.5 million	454 thousand
6. Chicago Bears	4 million	738.1 thousand
7. Cincinnati Bengals	1 million	356.5 thousand
8. Cleveland Browns	1.1 million	435.6 thousand
9. Dallas Cowboys	7.9 million	1.2 million

10. Denver Broncos	3.7 million	723.2 thousand
11. Detroit Lions	1.8 million	538.2 thousand
12. Green Bay Packers	4.9 million	956.1 thousand
13. Houston Texans	1.9 million	585.1 thousand
14. Indianapolis Colts	2.2 million	396.7 thousand
15. Jacksonville Jaguars	515 thousand	197.8 thousand
16. Kansas City Chiefs	1.1 million	407 thousand
17. Miami Dolphins	2 million	430.7 thousand
18. Minnesota Vikings	1.8 million	439.9 thousand
19. New England Patriots	6 million (6,057,545)	1.3 million
20. New Orleans Saints	3.9 million	654.3 thousand
21. New York Giants	3.7 million	765.7 thousand
22. New York Jets	1.8 million	759.8 thousand
23. Oakland Raiders	2.9 million	475.7 thousand
24. Philadelphia Eagles	2.9 million	734.6 thousand
25. Pittsburgh Steelers	6 million (6,056,200)	956.3 thousand
26. San Diego Chargers	1.6 million	400.3 thousand
27. San Francisco 49ers	4 million	924.9 thousand
28. Seattle Seahawks	3.5 million	923.8 thousand
29. St. Louis Rams	626 thousand	251.4 thousand
30. Tampa Bay Buccaneers	855 thousand	260.9 thousand
31. Tennessee Titans	2,394	259 thousand
32. Washington Redskins	1.8 million	431.6 thousand



\* Note: These figures are for 2015.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the social media strategies of teams in U.S. professional sports, specifically the NBA and NFL. The first research question asked what social media platforms are most currently utilized by NBA and NFL teams. Findings show that Facebook and Twitter are the two main social media platforms utilized by both NBA and NFL teams. This can be attributed to the fact that Facebook and Twitter have been around longer than any other social media platform, so their audience range is much larger. Facebook was introduced in 2004 and Twitter was born in 2006.

The second research question explored the impact of the use of social media on NBA and NFL teams' fan engagement. Results show that social media for the NBA and NFL teams allow fans to feel more involved with the team and the sport. According to research conducted by Mya, Mark and Matthew (2012), professional sports teams utilize social media networks to enhance relationship between the teams and their fans.

The third research question asked how the use of social media affected brand awareness for teams in the NBA and NFL. For the NBA, social media had affected brand awareness for teams because of the ability to engage consistently with the fans. For the NFL, social media affects brand awareness for teams because of the ability to promote the brand through mobile devices and also because of the large social reach that social media platforms offer. Due to social media, NBA and NFL teams are able to engage and communicate with fans constantly and if done correctly, the results will have a positive influence on the team's brand.

Research question 4 asked how social media enhanced the game experience for NBA and NFL fans within the arena/stadium when at a live sporting event. It was found that NBA and

NFL teams allow fans access to social media to post and upload status about their experiences at the game. Many teams run social media campaigns that fans participate in while viewing a live game within the stadium/arena. In a study conducted by Todd Weiss, it was explained that many NFL teams are upgrading their wireless technology within their arena/stadium to allow for fans to access their social media accounts and post and upload status about their game experience.

In addition, concerns may arise that social media can be a distraction as fans are viewing the game within the arena/stadium because their attention will be on social media and not the game. A response to that concern is that teams make sure fans use social media within the arena/stadium as a way to engage the fans with the game, teams and players. Many teams will run social media campaigns during timeouts, breaks and halftime that fans only within the arena/stadium can participate in.

The final research question asked what NBA and NFL teams has the highest social media likes/followers on Facebook and Twitter. Results showed that the Los Angeles Lakers is the NBA team with the most likes/followers on Facebook and Twitter; with 21 million likes on Facebook and 4.2 million Twitter followers. The Los Angeles Lakers are one of the most popular teams in the NBA because they have the second most NBA championship with 16 total (Scaletta, 2014). Results also show that the Dallas Cowboys have the most Facebook likes with 7.9 million likes. The Dallas Cowboys have the second most Superbowl wins in NFL history with a total of five (“Team Records: Games, Victories, Defeats”, 2015). New England Patriots has the most Twitter followers with 1.3 million. It was found in the above literature that the New England Patriots were among the few NFL teams that have upgraded their Wi-Fi technology to allow fans to connect to their social media sites during the game (Weiss, 2014).

The limitation with my research is the small sample size of interviews that was collected. I interviewed a three NBA teams out of a total of 30 teams. In addition, I interviewed two NFL teams out of a total of 32 teams. These represent a small size of NBA and NFL teams. Future research can provide larger sample size to represent more NBA and NFL teams. My methodology could have also included surveys, which would collect data from fans on how social media has influenced engagement with professional NBA and NFL teams. Further limitations within my research is that I did not analyze the NBA and NFL teams damage control procedures that they would take if fans, athletes, and/or staff members would post any negative comments related to the team.

The use of social media within professional sports has changed the way that teams and fans communicate with one another. As a result, many professional sports organizations have implemented social media as a major element within their overall business plan.

The NBA and NFL are two professional sports organizations that have been able to utilize social media well to build relationships with fans and improve their overall brand image. Social media allows to constant interaction and communication between teams and fans unlike any other mass media device, which makes it such an important tool within the sport world. Social media will continue to serve as a positive component for professional sport organizations and fans, and will be for many years to come.

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