Managing "Social Media Shaming" to Enhance Professional Sports Clubs' Reputation toward Fans with Disabilities

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Introduction

The global popularity of social network sites (hereafter SNS), mainly Twitter, as a marketing and communications tool is worthy of attention by those studying customer-centric industries, including sport management scholars and practitioners. Most of the extant research on the use of SNS in the sport industry has been exploratory in nature, mainly ethnocentric and focused on the U.S. experience on the proclaimed mutually significant positive economic (cost-effective) and social effects of those SNS for all types of sport organizations, brands and individuals (e.g. Abeza, O´Reilly, Séguin, & Nzinduklyimana, 2015; Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015). On this issue, SNS have changed the way sport fans, engage, communicate and interact with all types of sport organizations and individual athletes (Browing & Sanderson, 2012; Filo et al., 2015; Stavros, Meng,Westberg & Farrelly, 2014). An emerging challenge exists as sport organizations need to become better aware of the potential (negative) impacts of SNS activity by fans which are critical of the organization or the services provided to fans, which can lead to new ways of doing business. This need is particularly salient when considering a stadium's accessibility policies and how best to manage these customer service issues for fans with disabilities. Thus, the aim of this presentation is to consider the impact of "social media shaming" on managing accessibility policies by analyzing one fan's online interactions with an elite Premier League football club. In the context of this study, it can be argued that SNS have helped to bring and amplify the collective voice of one of the underrepresented groups as fans with disabilities in English football. As such, SNS can be a valuable medium to communicate social responsibility as part of their CSR commitments. Thus, the effective use of SNS can build and enhance an organization's reputational capital. Unfortunately, the converse is also true; failure to effectively manage SNS can turn organization-customer issues into a crisis considering the biggest threat that currently "social media shaming" presents to any sport organization (Ronson, 2015). This presentation discusses the importance of managing customer issues off-line in order to minimize damages to online and offline reputation, and is focused on interacting with fans with disabilities and accessibility and customer service issues in stadiums (Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Kitchin, in press).

In October 2014, Martin Emery, a lifelong fan of the club went to take his three sons to a home game. One of his son's experiences disability and as such was required to sit in a specific section within the stadium, away from his brothers. As his brothers were under 18 they had to sit with a parent, leaving Emery unable to be in two places at once. Upon contacting the club, Emery was not provided with a solution and accused the club of discrimination against disabled people. As a result, Emery, established a twitter account, @UtdDiscriminate and set up a blog to promote the impasse linked by the hashtag #BrothersUtd. His campaign was picked up by Level Playing Field and the Centre for Accessibility in Football in Europe (CAFE), the British and European disabled fans advocacy groups. From an analysis of a series of tweets and the original documents over the 12-month period, Emery carefully used official responses from the club's officials to intensify the issues, indicating correctly that the practices were in breach of the 2010 Equality Act. As the campaign progress it attracted wider interest, not just on line but in the traditional local and eventually national press. Following the prolonged exchange, the club has improved their disabled seating provision to ensure that families can sit together. An accessible family seating area has been approved and currently provide for Emery's, and other's families.

Marketing and Management Implications

As customers feel empowered to exercise their rights and voice concerns via SNS, sport organizations must be prepared to respond in an appropriate way. As was the case with Emery, the development of the physical infrastructure at the club's stadium and its policies and services related to accessibility for people with disabilities provides opportunity for criticism and the organization's response, if mishandled, provides stark evidence of the impact that "social media shaming" can have on a professional sport organization. As the matters grained greater traction online and in larger international press outlets, Emery was contacted by more senior club management, where the issues were not only resolved but actions were taken to further reinforce the club's CSR commitments to inclusion and access for all fans. By taking the discussions off-line and agreeing to the suggestions of a concerned and motivated fan, the club managed its reputation for leadership in the area of disability access provision (Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Grady, 2016; Paramio-Salcines et al., in press). Questions remain whether the online reputation of the organization is maintained and possibly its CSR credentials are even bolstered by their ultimate actions. This presentation will further highlight the marketing management implications of this case to all types of sport organizations, not just those involved in professional sport, in managing their online and offline reputational capital when dealing with the already complex and sensitive issue accessibility demands and fans expectations.

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