

2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

Using eSports Efficiently to Enhance and Extend Brand Perceptions

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25-minute oral presentation

(including questions)

While discussion and media coverage of esports has dramatically increased during the last two years, the use of esports by established consumer brands has not featured significantly in the marketing literature. The growth in esports is due, in part, to rapid advancements for in-home gaming platforms, video game software, on-line fantasy leagues (Burton et al, 2013; Gawrysiak et al, 2014) and virtual/augmented reality, even as many traditional consumer brands have been slow to capitalize on brand-building opportunities.

From a branding perspective, Rein et al (2006, p. 97) suggested a brand was “synthesis of facts and images that is often defined by slogans, themes, positions, symbols, product characteristics, and a number of other tangible and intangible attributes.” Strasser (1989) noted “consumer goods may be understood as artifacts of the new culture” and “networks of human relationships are a fundamental aspect of culture.” Those same networks are “essential to the development of what may literally be called consumer culture.” A decade later, Gwinner and Eaton (1999) looked at image transfer and how sponsorships influenced branding and brand positioning. They found “when the event and brand are matched on either an image or functional basis the transfer process is enhanced.” Evolution of cultural norms is to be expected and if “relevant cultural products reflect the evolving interests of a particular age” (Burton et al, 2013), then contemporary consumer brands must logically incorporate or utilize the imagery of the present culture in order to address key members of an intended target audience.

It stands to reason that if esports competitions paid out \$65-million in prize money in 2015 (Meeks, 2016) and if eSports businesses are projected to exceed \$1.1-billion in revenues by 2019 (Adweek.com) then esports are culturally relevant. Utzschneider (2017), writing about esports, suggested, “custom branded segments and native ads are some of the effective formats brands can experiment with and layer into their marketing strategies.” Further, “as the esports community continues to grow, it is developing even more passionate fans. Opportunities to engage with these ‘always-on’ consumers are on the rise. For marketers, it’s the next frontier to not only capitalize on live esports events and broadcasts, but flex their creativity when it comes to connecting with fans through more integrated advertising.”

Traditional models of marketing through sports may not correlate with esports. Advertising in venues is not seen as a major source of revenue for esports organizers like ESL. The focus is on the digital platform and getting consumer brands to market through social media outlets, rather than at the venues. Consumer brands should use this to focus on digital marketing plans, especially social media advertising as this represents the most popular way to follow esports (ESA, 2016). Facebook has especially become a major platform with branding opportunities as they purchased exclusive rights to broadcast a major esports event called Heroes of the Dorm with teams from the United States and Canada (Regan, 2017).

There further exists opportunities for consumer brands to integrate their global marketing efforts with newly established leagues or competitions such as the Overwatch League from Blizzard Entertainment. This particular league focuses on models of traditional sports with worldwide competitions with city-based teams (Blizzard, 2017). Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) posit that acquiring knowledge of the games being played, their novelty, and participant aggressiveness will increase viewership and, thus, be enticing marketing platforms. The Overwatch League should exhibit all of these traits since it is already played by 25 million people around the world and is structured in a unique way for esports (Frank, 2017). Brands should seek to capitalize on this global branding opportunity.

Research will be conducted with global sponsors that are currently using esports to grow their business globally (i.e., Mountain Dew, Papa John’s, General Mills) with an eye toward exploring positive image transfer as it relates to mass

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consumer engagement with esports. As a prime example, in July 2016, Mountain Dew struck a deal with esports organizations ESL and ESEA to become the title sponsor of a Counter-Strike competition (PepsiCo, 2016). Likewise, Papa John's is exploring the use of esports to enhance brand perceptions in Great Britain.

References

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