TRENDS IN ONLINE SPORT MARKETING

A Senior Project

presented to

the Faculty of the Recreation, Parks, & Tourism Administration Department

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science

by

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June, 2012

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ABSTRACT

TRENDS IN ONLINE SPORT MARKETING

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JUNE 2012

All professional sports teams are using the Internet as a part of their marketing strategy. In order for this to be successful, it is critical for sport marketers to evaluate which Internet marketing trends are being best utilized to connect with fans and website users. The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices in sport marketing in the five major professional sport leagues. Data were collected from five professional sports team's websites from the NBA, MLB, NHL, NFL and MLS. The instrument used consisted of a checklist with a section for written notes. The results indicated that all teams were using relationship marketing and also that they utilized very similar marketing practices. This is a critical baseline study to be used in the future by sport marketers and forecasters to determine success and shifts in trends.

Keywords: sport marketing, relationship marketing, strategies, trends, sport leagues

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of Study

The NBA was the first professional sport franchise to utilize sport marketing, but the new act of marketing wasn't exactly met with praise (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). People began second guessing the NBA and its product because they believed that it "turned into a marketing and entertainment organization that is more focused with selling jerseys, hats and highlight videos than products put on the floor" (Mullin et al., 2007, p. 2). Regardless of this public reaction, all professional sport franchises followed suit. Sports marketing evolved from only being related to product placement to being used as a tool to capture fans and create corporate partnerships ("The History," 2011).

The most important element of sports marketing is that it is entirely different than the traditional concept of marketing. The difference is that with sports, fans tend to develop strong relationships with their favorite teams and these teams hold a special place in their life ("The History," 2011; Mullin et al., 2007). This product relationship has more depth than more typical targets of traditional marketing like a laundry detergent or shirt. Fans will spend large amounts of money on game tickets, stay up late researching player statistics, or write letters to their favorite players. Another element that makes sports marketing unique from traditional marketing is that it is unpredictable, rapidly changing, and inconsistent (Mullin et al., 2007). Unlike selling a concert with a set playlist and agenda, a marketer never knows what is going to happen in the ninth inning

of a baseball game. All of these qualities make sports both difficult and enjoyable to market.

Most recently, the hottest trend in sport marketing is utilizing the Internet (Sutton, 2011). Whether by a team website, social media page, or blog, nearly all teams are using the Internet as part of their marketing strategy to build relationships (Loakimidis, 2010). The Internet is not only used as a tool to obtain information but, due to recent technology, it can be utilized as a two-way communication system. Now, websites are not only media sources but they are also a means for fans to communicate with the organization (Hur, Jae, & Valacich, 2011). This provides consumers with a stronger relationship with the team and in turn, increases brand awareness and profitability (Kim, Trail, & Ko, 2011).

The increase in internet-based marketing also comes with its share of challenges. Marketers are constantly struggling with engaging in new techniques while still marketing to the older demographics (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Therefore, it is critical that the current sport marketing trends are analyzed to determine what techniques are being best utilized to connect with all fans. In the present study, the researcher systematically analyzed the use of marketing in five professional sport leagues: Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, Major League Soccer, National Football League, and National Hockey League. The conclusion of this study identifies what trends are being used the most often and if there are different marketing techniques between leagues.

Review of Literature

Research for this review of literature was conducted at Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: Academic Search Elite, Expanded Academic ASAP, Hospitality & Tourism Complete, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar. This review of literature is organized into the following topic areas: sports marketing and relationship marketing.

Sport marketing. The manner with which professional sports teams choose to market themselves is constantly evolving. Due to the frequent changes in technology and trends, it is nearly impossible to constantly stay on the cutting edge. This section reviews research on three of the main concepts of sport marketing: sport tourism, fan loyalty, and online marketing.

Sport tourism is a recent manifestation of special interest tourism that focuses on engaging fans to travel to attend a sporting event. It is a growing niche that ranges from fans traveling one hour to three days to view a sport. Due to the widespread locations of sports, the Internet is used by sports teams as a main resource in connecting and communicating with fans throughout the world (Filo, Funk, & Hornby, 2009). One form of sport tourism that is becoming increasingly more common is international sport tourism. According to Ratten and Ratten (2011), "As the shift in international business has focused more on Asia due to the rapidly advancing economies of China and India it is important for professional sports teams to spend more money on these emerging markets" (p. 619). Maintaining and expanding a global fan base through marketing will increase brand awareness and benefit a professional sport team.

An important component of sport tourism is communicating with fans who are spread out and not located near a professional sport team. A key to marketing to these fans is the use of internet marketing. Sport organizations should utilize Internet marketing to communicate information, updates, events, and other information that is relevant to current and potential sport tourists (Filo et. al, 2009). Based on this assumption, Filo et. al found 15 distinct themes that should be communicated on a professional sports team's website to engage sports tourists. These themes are: event ticket procurement, venue site, shopping locations, accommodations, event schedule, local attractions, entertainment opportunities, travel costs, public transport, food and concessions, location of event, parking, safety and security measures, weather forecast and conditions, and traffic conditions (p. 26). Ideally, when all of these 15 themes are included on a team's website, fans feel a greater connection and are more likely to attend events (Filo et al., 2009).

Another important factor of sport marketing is maintaining fan loyalty. Loyalty to a sports team is more extreme than loyalty to any other typical product because it tends to be more intense and long term (Bee & Havitz, 2010). Meir and Scott (2007) described the intensity of loyalty shared by fans as a tribal tendency. A tribe refers to a group of people who are united by a shared passion, similar to a family or a tight-knit community (Meir & Scott, 2007). Marketers are becoming aware of the tribal tendencies of sports fans and are in turn marketing to them as a whole to increase loyalty (Meir & Scott, 2007). The tribal nature of fans mutually benefits sport organizations by providing a community for fans as well as a solid consumer base for the teams.

One final trend in sport marketing is the advanced use of the Internet for marketing. According to Hur et al., (2009), the overwhelming popularity of the Internet

makes it an integral part of a professional sport team's marketing strategy; it serves as a multi-use vehicle that allows fans to engage in visiting sport websites, obtain game results, shop for merchandise, and much more. The Internet is an essential tool to all sports teams because it provides them with the opportunity to connect with virtually every fan in a way that fits their needs. Most teams have websites, social network accounts, Youtube accounts, fantasy opportunities and more (Loakimidis). All of these mediums benefit sport marketers because they provide a way for fans to interact with each other as well as the organization, and can provide the organization a greater understanding of fans' needs and wants (Loakimidis, 2010). Effective use of the Internet is absolutely vital to any sports marketing strategy because it fosters communication, displays information, and creates a bond between a team and their fan. Sport marketers have realized the relationship formed with fans because of the Internet and have since been using it as a vehicle for relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing. Relationship marketing is the result of advancement in technology that began in the late 1990s and in turn is one of the most cutting edge marketing trends (Williams & Chinn, 2010). According to Kim et al. (2011), relationship marketing is identified as any form of marketing that is aimed towards forming and maintaining meaningful relationships with consumers. It is the most important marketing trend to implement because the next decade is forecasted to be heavily focused on technology, and relationship marketing is a trendy response to this shift (Ozimeck & Stone, 2010). The following section begins with an introduction to relationship marketing, followed by how to using social media as a marketing tool, and concluding with how relationship marketing is used in professional sport organizations.

The main reason for the increase in relationship marketing is the assumption that it can improve relationships with consumers (Kim et al., 2011). An important aspect of relationship marketing is focusing on the quality rather than the quantity of relationships that are formed (Kim et al.). Relationships that don't seem genuine to consumers will not be beneficial to the organizations. Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) found that there are five specific elements that are important to forming quality relationships with consumers: trust, commitment, satisfaction, love, and intimacy (43). Improving these elements will improve the relationship quality consumers have with organizations and brands.

Another trend in relationship marketing is multigenerational marketing. This marketing tool is used to connect with all consumer generations. According to Williams, Page, Petrosky, and Hernandez (2010), the first tip in improving multigenerational marketing is to, "understand the backgrounds, morals, values, characteristics, institutions, lifestyle, preferences, and priorities of each generation" (p. 33). Papista and Dimitriadis (2012) noted that generations form relationships with varying relationship strength, marking the importance of differentiating marketing strategies for generation segments . Improving relationship marketing can improve multigenerational marketing and aid an organization by forming connections with each generation individually and society as a whole (Williams et al.). The encompassing scope of generational marketing makes it an integral component to any relationship marketing strategy.

Technological advances and the use of the Internet has led to an increase in online social media. According to Williams and Chinn (2010), "social media can be defined as the tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others" (p. 422). According to O'Shea and Alonso (2011), the main goal

when utilizing social media is to create a feeling of connectedness among consumers and add value to the organization. The main benefit of using social media as a marketing strategy is that it is an extremely cost effective way to disseminate information (O'Shea & Alonso, 2011). There was only one downside mentioned by researchers regarding utilizing social media: because social media is available to virtually anyone, it is impossible to control the information that is displayed on these cites. According to a participant in a study conducted by O'Shea and Alonso (2011), "Any person can make any comment: it could be a marketing piece, or a piece of editorial you have put online… it takes on a life of its own and then you have no control" (p. 207). Due to this lack of control, it is important for all organizations that utilize social media to have an employee to monitor and administrate all interactions online (O'Shea & Alonso, 2011).

Research in relationship marketing has shown that maintaining relationships with consumers is an important part of marketing. More specifically though, Kim et al. (2011) found that "a good relationship with sport consumers is a critical factor for successful sport business" (p. 29). Sports fans who perceive a high quality relationship with a team will invest more of their time and money into the team by attending games, purchasing licensed products, and more (Williams & Chinn, 2010). According to Williams and Chinn, the reason sport organizations have adopted relationship marketing is because most of their fans have long-term associations with a team sport. As stated by Williams and Chinn:

> 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 purchase 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. (p. 423)

Therefore, although relationship marketing is an important marketing tool to implement, it is an especially crucial element in a marketing strategy for sports organizations due to the previously stated reasons.

Summary. Trends in sport marketing and relationship marketing are important to understand when researching marketing trends in professional sports. There is a combination of sports marketing trends that are critical to a successful fan base for a professional sport team. The concepts of sport tourism, fan loyalty, and online marketing are all integral components of successful sports marketing. Relationship marketing is a critical marketing strategy to be implemented in an organization. The concepts of relationship marketing, social media, and sports marketing have been discussed and integrated together to form a cutting edge, modern marketing plan.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices in sport marketing in five North American professional sport leagues.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the cutting edge trends in sport marketing?

2. What sport marketing practices are most commonly used in professional sports?
3. Do marketing strategies differ by sport?

Delimitations

This study was delimited to the following parameters:

1. Trends in sport marketing were analyzed.
2. The data were collected during Spring 2012.
3. Information for this study was gathered using systematic content analysis and online research of selected professional teams' websites.
4. The instrument used was a fluid checklist that incorporated unique trends as they arose.

Limitations

This study was limited by the following factors:

1. The instrument used in this study was not tested for validity or reliability.
2. The Internet may not offer conclusive data to complete this study.
3. The sampling method used may not accurately represent the population.
4. The instrument used may not be inclusive of all marketing trends.

Assumptions

This study was based on the following assumptions:

1. The organizations were truthful with the information being provided.

2. The instrument used accurately represents all professional sport leagues.
3. The instrument used accurately represents all sport marketing trends.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as used in this study:

Best practices. techniques used that are found to be the most successful

Emerging trends. new practices that are becoming more popular

Relationship marketing. the use of creating relationships with all consumers that are being marketed to

Social media. Online websites used by companies and the general public for social purposes

Sports marketing. all aspects of promoting that have to do with a sport

Chapter 2

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices in sport marketing in five North American professional sport leagues. This chapter includes the following section: description of subjects, description of instrument, description of procedures, and method of data analysis.

Description of Subjects

The data were collected from the five professional sports franchises in North America: the National Hockey League (NHL), National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), and National Basketball Association (NBA). Teams from these professional sports leagues are located throughout the United States and Canada. Each league has a varying number of teams: NHL 30, NFL 32, MLB 30, MLS 19, and NBA, 30. Although these leagues have different structures and varying amounts of teams, they all have the common goal of providing professional sports to the public.

Description of Instrument

The instrument used in this study consisted of a variety of techniques to provide an encompassing report of a team's sports marketing practices (See Appendix A). The instrument was originally developed by the researcher and consists of a checklist and section for notes. To create the checklist, the researcher utilized the websites of five

teams that were not used in the study. The researcher systematically reviewed each website and added every marketing technique used onto the checklist. The final checklist included 32 marketing techniques. The instrument is fluid so that if a recurring trend was found, the researcher was able to add that to the checklist. The notes section was used to provide more in depth information regarding specific marketing techniques.

The draft instrument was pilot tested with eight sports teams that were not used in the actual study on March 29, 2012. Based on the results of the pilot test, the instrument was revised, and 12 new marketing trends were added to the checklist in addition to the notes section.

Description of Procedures

The subjects of the study were chosen utilizing systematic random sampling and an online number generator. The researcher utilized an Excel spreadsheet to list every team in each league in the order that they fell on the respective league's website, each team was then assigned a number. In order for the sample to be representative of the population, five teams from each league were chosen utilizing an online random number generator. The teams that correlated to those five numbers were used in the study. This process was repeated for each franchise for a total of 25 random subjects, with five teams from each league.

The instrument was systematically used on one subject from each league for the first round, and then one team from each for the second round. This process was conducted a total of five times. Research was conducted over a five day period from March 26, 2012 through March 30, 2012.

Method of Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Frequency was found for all sports marketing items on the checklist to determine which marketing tools were used most and least often. A content analysis was utilized to determine all techniques used by professional sports teams. This analysis was also used to determine if the different leagues utilize different marketing strategies. The notes section was compared between each trend and analyzed to determine non-numerical trends. It was also used to spot other unique findings in order to determine the cutting edge trends. Since inter-rater reliability was not used, the researcher recorded unbiased, factual data and remained completely objective through data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices in sport marketing in five professional sport leagues. This study consisted of an analysis of 25 professional sport team's websites. Data were collected from one team from each professional league for five days, resulting in a total of 25 teams. The instrument used was fluid to account for emerging trends found throughout the research process. Additionally, notes were taken to account for new trends or other unique findings. The following section presents notes from the instrument checklist and written section.

Most Common Marketing Practices

Upon completion of the pilot study, the most common marketing practices were removed from the main checklist. A new list was then created of sport marketing practices that were commonly utilized by every sport team. These marketing practices were mostly found on the team's homepage as well as the directory tabs. The following is a list of sport marketing practices that were utilized by all sport teams: banner with team name, rotating news stories, live video, next three to four game tabs with link to purchase tickets, merchandise tab, schedule, and lastly, links to Facebook and Twitter.

Aside from sport marketing techniques that were utilized by every team, there were trends that were more common. The researcher determined practices to be more common if they were being utilized by ten or more sport teams. The most common marketing trend found was the advertising of community events, which were utilized by

22 teams. These teams had a "Community" tab and many also advertised for these events on the team's home page. Two other more common marketing practices were the use of live social media feeds. Live Twitter feeds were utilized by 17 of the teams, meaning that they had a section on their homepage dedicated for live streaming of the team's Twitter account. A complete list of the most common trends can be found in Table 1. Please note that only the use of live social media feeds are included as a most common practice. Social media use that was not feeding live is included separately in this chapter.

Table 1
Most Common Sport Marketing Practices by Frequency and Percentage

Sport Marketing practices	*f*	%
Polls	10	40.00
Player Merchandise	10	40.00
Newsletter	10	40.00
Live Facebook Feed	11	44.00
Translators	12	48.00
Text Clubs	13	52.00
Mobile App	15	60.00
Blogs	16	64.00
Live Twitter Feed	17	68.00
Community Events	22	88.00

Most Common Use of Media

All sports teams utilized the use of media on their websites. Aside from having live video on their homepage, all teams also had a "Media" tab where visitors can locate many different forms of virtual and audio media. Most commonly found under the

"Media" tab included wallpapers, video feeds, message boards, podcasts, Hulu, iTunes, and Flickr accounts.

The website analysis concluded that all teams evaluated utilized at least two social media accounts as a marketing practice. The instrument included a section to determine if the team utilized a live social media feed as well as a notes section to record every social media site that the team had an account under. All teams utilized Facebook and Twitter, and most teams had links to these sites on their homepage as well as under the "Social Media" tab. All other links to social media sites were found under the team's "Social Media" tab. A more detailed account of the most commonly utilized social media sites can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Most Commonly Utilized Social Media Sites by Frequency and Percentage

Social Media Site	*f*	%
Youtube	10	40.00
Google +	12	48.00
Facebook	25	100.00
Twitter	25	100.00

Marketing Strategies by Sport

The study revealed that different marketing strategies were used more or less heavily depending on the sport. The following sections describe the trends and practices found for each professional sport league.

The NBA utilized more fan-centered marketing practices. A large percentage of the teams offered marketing practices that allowed for fans to connect with the teams and individual players. Out of all of the teams studied, 80% offered polls and team blogs for fans to use. 40% of the teams studied offered translating services to translate the website to either Spanish or Chinese. The NBA teams studied relied less heavily on social media and media use, with only one team utilizing live social media feeds and one offering a mobile phone app. A complete list of the five most common marketing practices found on the NBA websites can be found in Table 3. The overall social media sites used by the NBA teams studied were Facebook (5), Twitter (5), Google+ (2), and Youtube (1).

Table 3
Five Most Common Marketing Practices of NBA by Frequency and Percentage

Marketing Practice	*f*	%
Advertised Dancers	5	100.00
Polls	4	80.00
Blogs	4	80.00
Team Leaders	3	60.00
Ticket Deals	3	60.00

The NFL utilized similar marketing practices to the NBA. Again, 80% of the teams offered polls, with every poll being related to team strategy. All NFL teams had a large blog section that offered certain player and coach blogs. The league also catered to the Spanish speaking population with 40% of teams offering Spanish translating services. A full list of the five most common marketing practices found on the NFL websites can

be found in Table 4. The overall social media sites used by the NFL teams studied were Facebook (5), Twitter (5), Google + (1), and Youtube (1).

Table 4
Five Most Common Marketing Practices of NFL by Frequency and Percentage

Marketing Practice	*f*	%
Blogs	5	100.00
Polls	4	80.00
Advertised Dancers	4	80.00
Live Twitter Feed	3	60.00
Mobile Apps	3	60.00

MLB was unique compared to other leagues with a standard template utilized by all teams. All of the MLB teams had a Team Leaders section, live Twitter and Facebook feeds, newsletters, mobile apps (controlled by the MLB), blogs, translating services, and text message clubs. All MLB websites only had advertisements from the MLB, which made the site simple to navigate. The social media sites used by 100% of the teams were: Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, and Google +.

The NHL utilized both fan-centered and technological marketing practices. Sixty percent of the teams had homepage entries. A homepage entry is a full page advertisement on the site's home screen that visitors must enter through in order to get access to the team's websites. One homepage entry was an advertisement for The Ale House, while the two other entries were focused on playoff tickets. Forty percent of the teams connected with fans with sections for team leaders, blogs, and also a team newsletter. A full list of the five most common marketing practices found on the NHL

websites can be found in Table 5. The overall social media sites used by the NHL teams studied were Facebook (5), Twitter (5), Youtube (3), Google+ (3), and Pinterest (1).

Table 5
Five Most Common Marketing Practices of NHL by Frequency and Percentage

Marketing Practice	*f*	%
Dancer Advertisement	4	80.00
Live Twitter Feed	3	60.00
Mobile Apps	3	60.00
Homepage Entries	3	60.00
Text Clubs	3	60.00

The MLS teams did not utilize as many marketing strategies as the other sports studied. However, MLS more heavily utilized live social media with 100% of the teams having a live Twitter feed. The teams also hosted a wider variety of social media sites. All of the teams had Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube while 20% of the teams also used newer social media sites such as Foursquare, Linkedin, and Google+. A full list of the six most common marketing practices found on the MLS websites can be found in Table 6.

Table 6
Six Most Common Marketing Practices of MLS by Frequency and Percentage

Marketing Practice	*f*	%
Live Twitter Feed	5	100.00
Translators	4	80.00
Live Facebook Feed	3	60.00
Advertised Stadium Events	3	60.00
Mobile Apps	3	60.00
Ticket Deals	3	60.00

Emerging Trends

An emerging trend found when examining the sport marketing practices of the teams in this study was connecting with the largest number of people possible. To do this, teams utilized a wide variety of means of communication with over 60% of all teams using newsletters, blogs, and social media. A comprehensive list of communication trends utilized to market sports teams can be found in Table 7.

Table 7
Communication Trends in Sport Marketing by Frequency and Percentage

Communication Technique	*f*	%
Newsletter	16	64.00
Mobile App	15	60.00
Blogs	12	48.00
Translators	12	48.00
Text Clubs	10	40.00

An obvious trend in sport marketing that was found was the use of social media with all of the teams utilizing sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The emerging trend found in sport marketing though was the usage of the newer social media sites. Twelve percent of teams have begun using Google + while more teams have started to use others. A more comprehensive list of the use of newer social networking sites as an emerging trend can be found in Table 8.

Table 8
Usage of New Social Media Sites by Frequency and Percentage

Social Media Site	*f*	%
Google +	12	48.00
Pinterest	6	24.00
Foursquare	2	8.00
Linkedin	1	4.00

The data collected on 25 professional sport teams indicated that several marketing practices were universally used with all teams. The most common marketing trend was the advertisement of community events, which was utilized by 22 of the teams. All teams also offered a wide variety of regular media that can be utilized by all website visitors. Every team had both Facebook and Twitter accounts, with the second two most popular social media sites being Youtube and Google +. Although all sports had similar top marketing practices, no sport was exactly the same. However, within the MLB, all teams had completely standardized websites and marketing practices. The emerging trends found focus on communicating information to fans via different vehicles with the

most recent vehicle being the mobile phone. The results presented in this chapter indicate a need for future trends research. A detailed summary and a discussion of the findings will follow in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In order for sports marketers to be successful, it is crucial that they be knowledgeable about the current trends and cutting edge practices. These trends must constantly be analyzed to determine what techniques are being best utilized to connect with fans and website users. This is a critical baseline study to be used in the future by sport marketers and forecasters to determine success and shifts in trends. This concluding chapter will include the following: summary of the study, a discussion of the findings including limitations, conclusions based on research questions and recommendations for the organizations and future research.

Summary

Since the NBA ignited the sport marketing craze years ago, incorporating the use of the Internet into a marketing strategy has recently become the hottest trend. All professional sport teams are now using the Internet as part of their marketing strategy to foster communication, display information and create a bond with their fans. In order to do this, teams are using relationship marketing to form and maintain meaningful relationships with their fans. Websites are now full of different marketing practices aimed towards maintaining relationships with fans and getting them to the games. This study analyzed professional sports team's websites in order to determine the best practices in sport marketing.

In Spring 2012, data were collected from five professional sports team's websites from the NBA, MLB, NHL, NFL, and MLS. The instrument used consisted of a checklist and section for written notes. The instrument was fluid so that recurring trends could be added to the checklist and notes could be taken as needed. The teams studied were randomly chosen through a random number generator and will remain anonymous. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Frequency and percentages were found for all trends and the written notes section was used when qualitative information was needed.

Results from the study indicated that many marketing practices were being used with all teams. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were used as a strategy for every team studied. Although all sports had some of the same and similar practices, the specific marketing strategy was different between each sport. The emerging trends focused on relationship marketing and communicated with fans in as many ways as possible.

Discussion

Results from this study revealed that the overall marketing practices used in the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, and MLS are extremely similar. All team websites have similar if not exactly the same website configurations with differing information depending on the team. This simple layout makes website navigation easy for all users, especially if the user is visiting multiple websites. All team's websites are themed according to the team's colors and they all project a team banner on the top of the page for easy team identification. Also along the top of the home page lies a website directory which includes a tab for tickets, schedules, players, media, merchandise, and more.

The overall goal of a team's website is to form an instant connection with the user. While the standardized website components such as the schedule, roster, etc. focus on the technical aspect of marketing, other marketing aspects focus on building a relationship. One of the ways that teams do this is by offering multiple vehicles for communication. The user, depending on their technological preference (or even particular mood) can then choose how they want to receive information. The more tech savvy user may gravitate towards the live Twitter feed, mobile app, and text club while the older generations may tend to utilize newsletters and blogs.

Social media is obviously one of the hottest trends right now. Every single team studied offered both a Twitter and a Facebook page for fans to use and communicate with. Since Twitter and Facebook are now becoming common practice with teams, research showed that many teams are expanding their social media use by linking new sites to their websites. Google + is becoming increasingly more common as well as linking a Youtube video account to the team's websites. The MLS teams studied had the widest variety of social network sites by including sites such as Foursquare and Linkedin. The NHL also had a wide variety with one team offering a link to a Pinterest account. The increase in social media represents the team's interest in forming a more personal relationship with fans.

Regardless of how the user prefers to access information, it is there ready and available for users of all ages and abilities. It is also interesting to note the format of information found on these information venues. Information from text clubs, mobile apps, blogs, and Twitter feeds is written in a much more informal tone than typical press releases and news stories. This informal writing caters towards the users' needs rather

than having a strictly business relationship with them. Common marketing practices such as polls and live Facebook and Twitter feeds also foster relationships by letting users interact with the team, allowing for two-way communication.

Data collected from the different sports teams reflected that the different sports leagues had different strategies that seemed to cater to their audience. Although these sports have different specific strategies, the overall marketing practices were similar. No single trend was specifically spotted repeatedly in only one sport. Even homepage entries, which were a new trend mainly found in the NHL, were also found from teams in the NBA and NFL. This leads to the assumption that different sports monitor each other closely to constantly explore the evolving sport marketing practices.

This study was impacted by several limitations. The greatest limitation involved the sample size. The overall sample size of all combined teams was sufficient but the sample of 5 teams per sport league was too small to offer fully conclusive data. Although the research conducted on these websites was useful, it is possible that it may not accurately portray the marketing practices of the overall sport leagues.

Another crucial limitation was the time of year that data were collected. Since the data were collected in March, certain sports were not in their regular season. This significantly impacts the information that is being displayed on their websites and the marketing practices being used. The time of day that the websites were analyzed was also a limitation. If the website was being analyzed at the same time that the team was playing a game, typically live game updates would take the place of whatever was normally located at that section of the website. This made it difficult to accurately observe the marketing practices.

Results from this study were extremely consistent with the literature reviewed by the researcher. The obvious trend of utilizing the Internet for sport marketing proved to be absolutely correct with every team studied having an Internet website. Also, the trend of relationship marketing was spotted very often through the use of social media sites and through the effort of teams forming meaningful connections with fans. Forming meaningful connections relates to the team's variety of sport marketing practices and the absence of solely providing factual, one-sided information to users. Lastly, the trend of international sport marketing as well as sport tourism was shown very often through the use of translating services.

There are several implications from this study. The results imply that there is a continuous need to evaluate sport marketing practices because they are constantly evolving and changing. It is also critical that marketers use information such as the results from this study when comparing the past and present marketing practices. Although this study provided useful information on the current sport marketing trends, it should mainly be used as a baseline study when comparing and forecasting marketing trends. The contributions to the field of sport marketing from this study are incredibly important and provide a stepping stone leading to greater conclusions as sport marketing practices and strategies evolve.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. The cutting edge trends in sport marketing are practices in which the sport team communicates with fans in creative ways in regards to technology development.
2. The most common sport marketing practices are hosting community events, live twitter feeds, blogs, mobile apps, and text clubs.
3. Marketing strategies were similar between sports but the specific marketing practices differed.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Stay up to date with current trends in technology and utilize them in marketing practices.
2. Continue to enhance the social media offerings on the team's website.
3. Do not only focus on the quantity of fans but also on forming meaningful relationships with fans.
4. Pursue other forms of sport marketing on top of marketing through the internet
5. Closely monitor the marketing practices used by the other sports to see if they should be adopted and adapted.
6. Continuously evaluate marketing practices for success and forecasting.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Questionnaire

NBA: Toronto Raptors

	Trend	Notes
Slogan		
Video		
Polls		
Stat of the week		
Day in History		
Team leaders		
Merchandise		
Advertising		
Ticket Sales		
Dancers		
Twitter		
Youtube		
Facebook		
Stadium events		
Community events		
News		
PSL sales		
Rotating photos		
Newsletter		
Mobile apps		
Blogs		
Translators		
Homepage entries		
Wallpaper		
Schedule		
Text Clubs		
Deal of the week		
Picture of the day		
Live game updates		
Countdowns		
Preseason coverage		
Ticket deals		
Team Extras		