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March 23, 2010 2:41 pm | 3 Comments

Social Throwdown

Social media makes the NBA the No. 1 most visible sports league.

by [Kyle Stack](#) / [@NYSportswriter](#)

NBA players are arguably the most recognizable and marketable athletes in the world, so it makes sense for the League to stand at the forefront of social media integration.

Most sports leagues have discovered the value in harnessing the positive aspects of social media marketing — its relative low cost, the ease of developing a message and the ability to reach a seemingly infinite number of fans in a matter of seconds. The NBA hasn't just uncovered social media's value; it has found ways to execute its strategies to maximize its possibilities.

The NBA recently announced that its [Facebook fan page](#) became the first among any professional sports league to surpass two million fans. It was only last July that the League's fan page reached the one million mark.

Melissa Brenner, who serves as the NBA's Vice President of Marketing, explained that the League's strategy on Facebook was simply to find its fans.

"In the beginning, we were focused on building a fan base," Brenner. "We have a community of fans on Facebook, so it was a matter of trying to find them and bring them to our page."

Brenner expressed that since the League has built a substantial presence on the social networking site, they're now focused on driving consumption. In layman's terms, they want to use Facebook as a conduit to move fans to NBA.com to watch games and buy products at NBAStore.com.

The NBA has been successful at unearthing its Facebook audience despite its hardships, according to Amy Martin, founder of Phoenix-based [Digital Royalty](#), which develops social media strategies for corporate and entertainment brands.

"That balance between marketing, entertainment and innovation is very tricky, especially on Facebook," Martin said.

But Martin emphasized that while the League has succeeded in acquiring fans on Facebook and Twitter, where the League's official account has more than 1.8 million followers — the highest figure of any sports league — they can improve in other areas.

"The League still has work to do in humanizing the brand and evolving beyond the play-by-play and marketing tune-in messaging to add that level of entertainment that's exclusive and can't be found in other channels," Martin said.

Brenner said the NBA's initial strategy on Twitter was to communicate what was happening in games so that fans would tune in on TV or through NBA.com to watch the final portions of live contests. Think of it as an online version of CBS' NCAA Tournament first- and second-round coverage in which the broadcast jumps to different games depending on which have potentially exciting finishes. Then the NBA found a way to expand their [footprint on Twitter](#).

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Brittney

"We started talking to our marketing partners and they were more interested in reaching our fans in a new, innovative way," Brenner said. "We started realizing there was a tremendous opportunity to drive products."

The combination of connecting with its Twitter followers while utilizing its marketing partners helped the NBA become the top-rated brand on Twitter based on followers, according to [trackingtwitter.com](#), placing it above companies such as Whole Foods, JetBlue and Starbucks. The [NBA's YouTube channel](#), which has had more than 390 million videos viewed since February 2007, complemented the NBA's presence on Twitter and Facebook well enough for the League to become the fifth most social brand in 2009, according to Vitruve's annual Top 100 Social Brands List.

While the NBA has experienced success on those platforms, Soraya Darabi, a Product Lead for Brooklyn-based online file sharing company [drop.io](#) and [presslift.com](#), insists that any sports league must delve deeper into the world of social media.

"Facebook, YouTube and Twitter is the minimum barrier to entry for having a social media presence," Darabi said. "The communities that exist across each and every platform that is scaled are craving specific content about a brand."

Darabi explained that fans visiting a photo-sharing Web site such as Flickr may desire high-resolution photos of events and games. Another possible outlet is a video-sharing site in which fans could view edited videos of game highlights or chunks of game action. If a company questions whether it could devote the proper amount of time to institute this type of strategy into a marketing plan, Darabi insisted that the work could be outsourced to trained individuals who understand those mediums.

She also pointed toward a future in which sports leagues can take advantage of the specific markets in which teams exist.

"Geolocation is really what's next," Darabi said. "People can talk specifically with other people at the event. They know the person they're talking to is at the event and not just watching it on TV."

Martin added that UFC, a client of Digital Royalty, has taken advantage of that by placing fighters at events to market upcoming fights. UFC fighters are also encouraged to use Twitter and Facebook strategically, as a lead-up to their impending fights in various locales.

"The UFC has been able to get the fact that if they can provide value and deliver information when, how and where fans want to receive it, they realize they can really take advantage of the opportunity from a business standpoint," Martin said. "They've taken the power of the virtual world and brought it into the physical world."

Darabi pointed out that increased mobile usage could mean the NBA would fare better at marketing products through cell phones rather than traditional digital advertising on scoreboards and LED boards.

Until that time arrives, the NBA will continue to stand as the most visible sports league on three major social media platforms — Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. As a result, NBA players will continue to be among the most recognizable athletes in the world.

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3 Responses to "Social Throwdown"

[Nima Zarrabi](#) Posted: Mar.23 at 7:00 pm

Interesting read, Kyle. And thanks for the links within the piece. Some cool sites to check out.

serevei Posted: Mar.23 at 7:01 pm

first

[Kyle Stack](#) Posted: Mar.24 at 12:06 am

Thanks, Nimba. Yeah, I learned a ton just through the interviews and research. Love that the NBA makes their videos available through YouTube.

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