

Storytelling as a marketing communication tool

New Trends in Sports Marketing example

Hungarian Basketball Champion - FALCO KC

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Abstract: We examined the storytelling strategy of a four-time Hungarian champion basketball team through a case study. Today's consumers have an infinite amount of information at their disposal. One of the reasons for this is the proliferation of smart devices that allow you to enter the online world from anywhere, at any time. The reason for this is social media, which allows users to produce their content and decide what and who they want to "follow". Sports companies need to keep up with these changes as they compete for consumers' money and time as part of the entertainment industry. The team we studied launched a new series last season, with storytelling as its main motif. During the period under review, the team's YouTube subscribers doubled, and thanks to content distribution, they used the content they produced on all three other social media platforms. The core content was viewed by 90% of the 18-34 age group and it should be highlighted that 97% of the content was consumed by men.

Keywords: sports marketing, marketing communication, fan engagement

1 Introduction

Marketing and economic trends in recent years have shown that, in addition to a social media presence, sports clubs are increasingly focusing on content production and analysis [6]; [7]; [18]. Researchers justify the energy invested by sports clubs in building digital engagement with the acceleration of digitization caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as the current situation calls for new solutions [16]; [17]; [18]. In recent years, the relationship between consumers and sponsors has become more valuable, the latter is no longer satisfied with a visual presence on match days and wants to gain more advantage from the cooperation [5]; [12]; [16].

Social media encompasses a wide range of digital tools, so characterizing its overall impact on young people remains a challenge [5]; [8]; [13]; [16]. In addition, it's critical to identify how social media specifically affect young people's behavior [2]; [3]; [5]; [8]; [10]; [13]. Social media is a recent form of media with several characteristics and attributes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

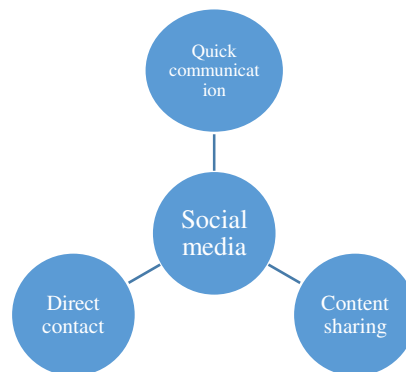


Figure 1
Why social media is so trendy?

2 Literature review

Storytelling as a marketing tool is nothing new in the world of marketing [10]; [12]. Storytelling aims to challenge consumers' liking, evoke empathy, and personalize the consumer-seller relationship [1], [9]; [10]; [15]. In line with Pan and Chan's study, a business needs to understand how the story is interpreted and understood by its audience to develop more persuasive storytelling strategies [11]; [14] It is important to know the consumer's perspective because you are telling your story to them, not to yourself [9]; [11]! Kakroo (2015) defined storytelling as emotional packaging that can motivate consumers to take action [12]; [15]. The phenomenon

was narrowly termed 'story', while the process of describing the phenomenon was termed 'narrative' [1]; [11]; [14]. In parallel with the gradual focus on the experience economy, businesses have based their business models on creating customer love [12]; [15]. Jeong and Koo (2015) argued that storytelling as a tool can bridge the gap between expectation and authenticity, to show more 'credibility' [11]; [14].

Today, the same goals are still on the list for companies. Sports companies and professional sports clubs are no exception [6]; [7]. The revenue structure of a business-based sports club is built on 5 main pillars [4]. Digital engagement and storytelling can be used to help teams' revenue structure both directly and indirectly. We can assume that the number of social media followers of a team is an indicator of the team's potential fan base [6]. The higher this number, the more fans a team has, and therefore the more valuable the club's product [4]. Because of the supply-demand relationship, it can be assumed that the more consumer interest, the more expensive the club can sell its service [4]; [7]; [18]. The same parallel can be drawn for the merchandise market, as the more people in the fan base, the greater the chance of selling fan trinkets, and therefore the demand-supply price increase may also be present. The principle is similar to the TV market. A sports team helps to strengthen the relationship between the team and the fan base through active storytelling, and storytelling also provides an opportunity for new consumers to join the team's fan base. The more interest there is, the more valuable the sports club and the event or league will be for TV [4]; [9]. Seemingly, social media may not have much impact on the player market, even though in today's world, players are just as attentive to the opportunities their team gives them to appear "off the field". The professionalism of a team's social media presence now means a lot to players. We have left the effects of digital engagement on the sponsorship market at the end of our list because the latter is boosted both directly and indirectly by an active, planned storytelling campaign [7]; [9]; [15]; [16] [17]. The size of the sponsorship market is related to the volume of consumers, so the indirect link is understandable [4]; [18]. The production of digital has, at the same time, allowed teams to market it and convert it into sponsored content [9]. If we consider this as a new pillar, the social media market has emerged, but in our opinion, there is a replacement for the classic sponsorship definition [4]; [17]; [19].

3 Method

Our research was carried out in a larger step. In the first stage, we carried out a document analysis on the following topics:

- digital engagement
- storytelling
- social media

In the second stage, we conducted a case study focusing on the impact of the storytelling campaign of Falco-Vulcano Energia KC, the four-time Hungarian champion basketball team. Specifically, we measured the impact of the team's "Off the Court" program on their YouTube channel.

4 Results

According to an article announcing the show, the team's main aim with the 'Pályán kívül' named series is to give a deeper insight into the players. As a means to this end, the in-depth interviews were conducted in a car rather than on or around the basketball court, as usual. Ho's study (2013) revealed that the 3 main goals of storytelling are:

- building trust between seller and buyer
- Building empathy, awakening empathy
- Empowerment and empowerment - Empowerment the customer to empathize, empathize and awaken the customer [15].

The question arises why a sports team, which is mostly judged by its performance on the pitch, should invest resources in a successful storytelling campaign. The answer is almost self-explanatory. By using storytelling, the team was able to take the players out of the jersey and present them as people to the fans. When you consider that in the two years before the show came out, fans were not even allowed to attend matches (Covid 19 rules), the answer is even more telling. Falco wanted to give. To give to the fans so that a deeper understanding could develop between the athletes and the fans. The team chose its YouTube channel to be the main platform of the show, as the average length of an in-depth interview is between 35 and 50 minutes. Of all the social media platforms presented above, YouTube is the best for content producers wishing to share longer videos.

In our study, we present and analyze the results of the first season. The 12-part series generated 21114 views, which also boosted the number of subscribers to the team's YouTube channel. Figure 2 shows the breakdown by episode and provides a summary of how the team in Szombathely used content distribution.

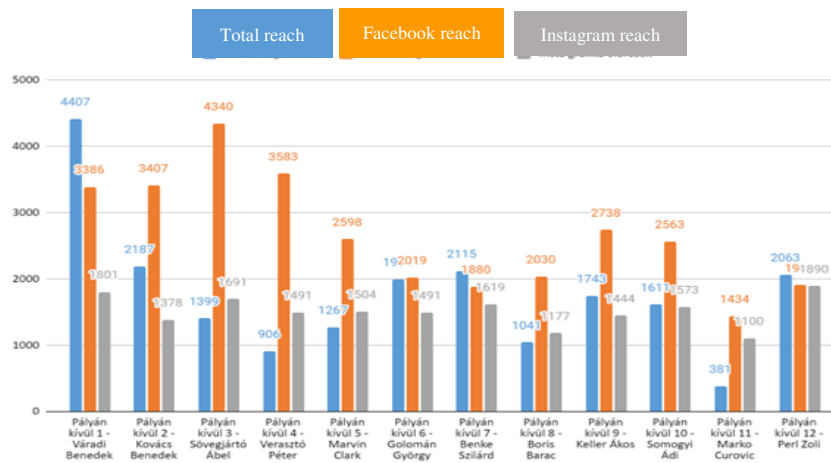


Figure 2.

The results of the content distribution

It's visible that there have been breakout results and views. This is mainly explained by the fact that fans were more willing to click on bigger names and content about home-grown players. Another recurring pattern to be discovered is that interviews in foreign languages generated fewer views. The difference can be interpreted in two ways. The first approach is that the majority of foreign players spend 1 season with the team so that not as much bonding and interest can develop between the fan and them. In contrast, players with local ties have been the backbone of the team for 3-5 years. The other explanation may come from content consumption. The subtitles for the foreign language content, on the other hand, may mean that the majority of fans have consumed and are consuming the Off the Field series rather than a podcast. Gender and age specificities were also detected in the analysis of the program, the former being illustrated in Figure 3.

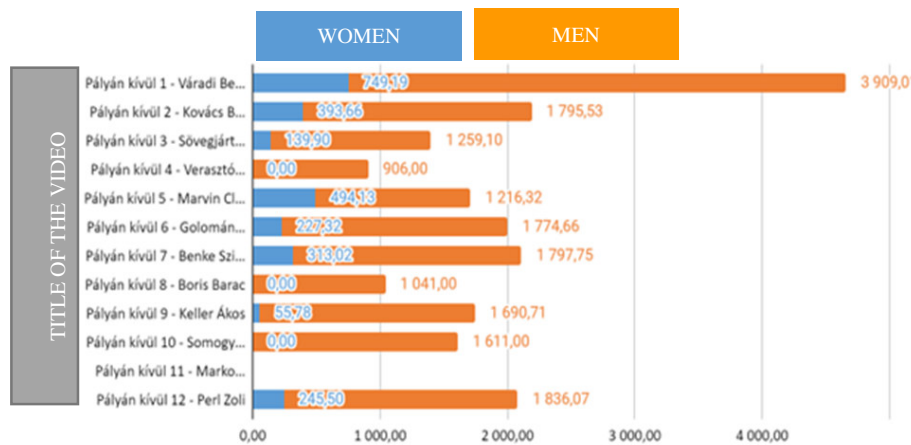


Figure 3.
Gender differences

Figure 3 clearly shows that the sex ratio is constant regardless of the player. The first season episodes were viewed by an average of 1,759 viewers, 13% of whom were female, while the YouTube creator studio measured that 87% of viewers were male. Knowing the sport and the club, it's not a big surprise that male consumers are in the majority, but the proportion is surprising. Especially considering that the gender breakdown of followers on the team's Facebook page is 44% female and 56% male. Again, the difference is worth looking at from several angles. On the one hand, it could be a distorting data point that although a family watches the video, they started the playback from the father's user profile. The other, and perhaps a better explanation, is that this type of content is primarily of interest to hardcore fans, who are shown to be mostly male.

The rise of digitalization has meant that the program has mainly reached young fans of the team. Taking all the videos into account, 89% of the viewers were in the 18-24 or 25-36 age group. Also, an interesting parallel is that the team's Facebook page does not show such a wide age gap, with a much healthier distribution. Based on current data, 15.8% of the team's Facebook page followers are in the 18-24 age group, 28.4% in the 25-34 age group; 23% in the 35-44 age group, 20.2% in the 45-54 age group, 6.8% in the 55-64 age group, and 5.8% in the over 65 age group. Given the digitalization of the world, the predominance of the younger age group is not surprising, but looking at content distribution, it is interesting and requires further measurement as to why the YouTube channel shows such a gap. Figure 4 shows the differences between the aging groups.

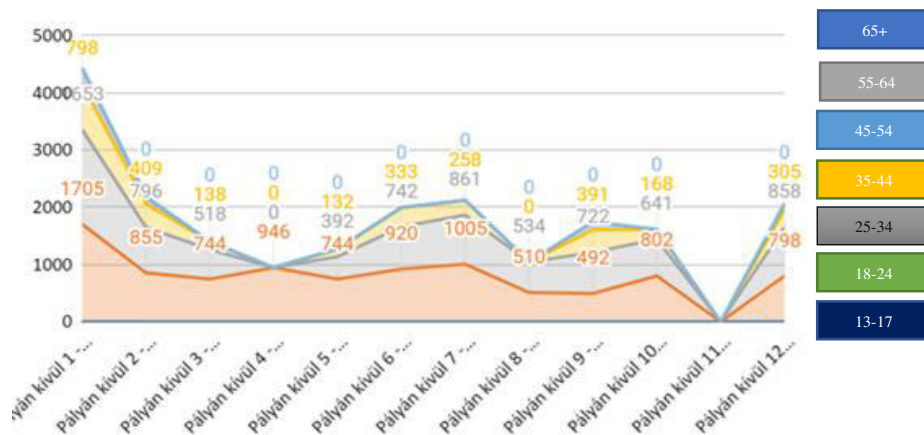


Figure 4.
Differences between age groups

5 Summary

All in all, the concepts of digital engagement, storytelling, social media, and their interpretation, analyzed in the initial stages of the research, have not only opened new doors in the world of content production, which is very much a dominant factor in the 21st century but have also paid great attention to meeting the needs of consumers as much and as widely as possible, helping business-based clubs to deepen their relationship with consumers. Social media is one of the most controversial topics of our time, with its speed, communication, and content sharing opportunities, the possibility for users to connect directly (just like sports clubs), but numerous studies have drawn attention to its negative effects on adolescents and young adults [2]; [3]; [5]; [8]; [13]; [16]. However, it also provides a great opportunity for sports clubs to connect with their followers and fans directly, through various visual or audiovisual content. This communication can also take place back there, as consumers can comment on and share the content. They have the freedom to express their opinions. Storytelling is a marketing strategy that focuses on gaining the empathy of the consumer. It aims to inspire love and a propensity to bond in consumers to develop a deeper relationship. However, to be successful, it is essential to know your consumers, as this sets the framework and the limits of how you tell the story and what you want to achieve. At the same time, great attention must be paid to credibility, as this is one of the main pillars of storytelling. As mentioned above, the 3 main pillars of storytelling are plot, character, and aesthetics. In the second phase, a case study was conducted, focusing on the impact of the storytelling campaign of Falco-Vulcano Energia KC, the four-time Hungarian champion basketball team. We measured the exact impact on the

YouTube channel of the team's 'Pályán kívül' show. The series was launched to give fans a deeper insight into the lives of the team's players, taking them out of the jersey (the in-depth interview was not conducted on the basketball court) and portraying them more humanly. The first season of 12 episodes has reached a total of 21114 views, which has also contributed to the number of new subscribers to the team's YouTube channel. From the views we have shown that videos with home-grown or bigger-name players generated higher viewership, and also a clear pattern that interviews in foreign languages (with Hungarian subtitles) had much lower viewership, the causal link is that the vast majority of foreign players spend only 1 season with the team, so they cannot develop a deeper bond with the fans. In terms of gender, 87% of our viewers were male, and by age group, the highest number of clicks were from the 18-24 and 25-36 age groups.

Conclusion

The primary conclusion of our study is that effective storytelling as a marketing tool can make the club more valuable to the consumer and, by extension, have a positive impact on the overall perception of the club. Storytelling provides consumers with an insight into the life of the club, which leads to a new and much stronger relationship and bond between the parties. This relationship can later be measured in economic terms for the club, where the bond that is formed can lead to the 'ordinary' fan becoming a fanatic, a ticket buyer becoming a season ticket holder, or a fan becoming more proud of their team and buying club merchandise. The conclusions are straightforward: if storytelling is used correctly, a larger club can be built, with a larger and more loyal fan base than at the outset. Building stronger loyalty is an essential aspect for any club, as engaged supporters can be relied on more securely and it's harder to fall into the traps of overpricing or overbuilding a built event or project while the club's fan and consumer base is not regular. Strongly loyal supporters stick with the club and are strong support either in terms of attendance figures or team product pricing, and this can also strengthen the club's negotiating position in some cases, for example with sponsors, as season ticket holders provide stronger support against ticket buyers.

A further conclusion is that storytelling can also help to build a larger fan base, as this method is currently a major novelty, - especially in the Hungarian sports marketing market - which means that even fans of neutral or other teams are interested in watching the material produced on this topic, which can lead to an increase in the club's fan base. Nevertheless, the spread of the method does not mean that it is without interest, as example, the presentation of the private sphere of the team and players, even during the COVID-19 period, could bring the club closer to the fans in a way that cannot be experienced even with a match experience. The impact of this content is already measurable and from this, we have drawn our conclusions that the method has had the effect of increasing overall fan interest in the club's content, in other words, it has had an impact and been effective.

It is also important to stress that the marketing activities of clubs are not only directed toward consumers. Players are a constant presence on teams' social media platforms, seeking to maximize their reach and promote themselves in a positive way, which means that a club with a larger following and a wider, more extensive marketing activity is more interesting for professional players, and can therefore be a factor in their transfer or retention/extension decision process. The potential impact of this decision could result in a stronger roster and therefore a stronger team, partly due to the club having a stronger permanent marketing activity in a rival club.

However, storytelling also needs to take into account the composition of the particular follower base. To do this, we can use data on followers from social media platforms to determine their composition, either by gender or age. This is a particularly important issue, as different age groups consume different content, have different interests and there are differences in the duration and length of videos and the resulting viewership, as younger generations have grown up in a faster-paced world that prefers shorter videos, as opposed to older generations. Understanding generational differences is an important consideration, especially when different generations have different consumption habits but the same interest in the person of the sports club. The importance of knowing the composition of the fan base proves the need for professionals who can effectively analyze and identify it. It is worth mentioning that there is already a fan-engagement manager at foreign sporting events whose primary role is to ensure a positive fan experience, which further proves that the relationship between fans and their relationship is worth investigating and is a real phenomenon. The rise of young people on social media is also noticeable, as today's children are without exception growing up in a world of the internet and smartphones, essentially socialized on social media, which means new consumers and a whole new trend reversal. The rise of the young is bringing a new wave of children who are being exposed to social media for the first time - and at a very young and younger age - and this is also an opportunity for clubs to engage them, but also a huge responsibility to try to present the sport in a positive, educational way in their posts and stories, because using social media for education can be a key issue for educating the generation that will grow up in it, and sports teams must be part of that. Ideas for educational content could include images and videos of school visits or highlighting the importance of physical education and foreign language skills on such occasions, choosing the right way to communicate in the accompanying text of posts, choosing the right context for textual content, and promoting the spirit of fair play.

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