

The Development of a Social Media Strategy for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights

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Abstract

In this thesis, an examination is conducted on the design, development, process, and execution of a social media strategy for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights, a junior hockey team composed of 16-20 year old players based in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The strategy takes into consideration not only the extraordinary role that social media can play in the success of a team's overall development and marketing plan, but also the team's specific mission and objectives as well as the intricacies that come with media within the sports industry. An in-depth literature review discusses the importance of a social media strategy and how an effective strategy can impact an organization, and explores various engagement theories that are heavily utilized within sports communication for social media strategies. The following sections detail the development of a strategic social media plan encompassing audience analysis and segmentation, content themes and types, the content creation process, analytics measurement, and a crisis management plan for the Knights. Methods of analyzing the plan's impact and content effectiveness through key performance indicators, which assist in evaluating various aspects of the plan's impact. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute to a field of sports communication that lacks robust research, as the implementation of social media strategies within amateur sports has not been thoroughly explored. The goal of this research is to provide practical recommendations for sports organizations seeking to optimize their digital presence and deepen fan loyalty and audience relationships with the team.

The Development of a Social Media Strategy for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights

As social media and digital marketing continue to gain traction across various disciplines, successful and thorough implementation into sports is rapidly gaining importance in order to effectively gain digital traction and audience attention (Appel et al., 2019). This thesis takes this concept and applies it to the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights. This research focuses primarily on effective leveraging of various social media platforms, respecting that amateur sports provide new challenges and audiences for social media and digital marketing plans. The importance of social media and its effects on the sports industry are explored, including various social media strategies that can be utilized in a social media plan within sports. A robust social media strategy outlines the stages of content planning, the content creation process, and how analytics are measured and used to maximize the performance of future content (Pappas et al., 2017). With the impact of social media on the fan and player experience within sports, effectively utilizing it through the development of a thorough social media strategy now plays a pivotal role in the overall marketing success of a team. The proposed social media strategy for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights has been tailored to the specific needs of the team and their industry in order to maximize its effectiveness while taking into considerations the specific intricacies found in the sports industry.

Literature Review

The Rise of Social Media Marketing

The use of social media has increased across all disciplines in the last decade as a means of promoting a business and more accurately appealing to the target market. With the rise of Web 2.0 in the early 2000's, marketing has morphed to include the digital marketing discipline, focusing the shift of many marketing strategies from analog means to the Web (Berthon et al.,

2012). This then allowed marketing teams to create and collaborate in a universal digital space which allowed for much greater audience reach than previous mediums, and in ways which encouraged much more interaction with the advertisements than otherwise possible with nondigital strategies. Various different social media platforms have come and gone within the last few decades, but the recent expansion and diversification of the platforms have allowed for a number of new functionalities from them that allow marketers to access additional communication tools (Lopez-Carril et al., 2020).

Despite the benefits that social media provides for marketing professionals, there still lacks a conclusive definition within academia as to what social media is. Broadly, social media is any collection of digital software technologies that allow users to interact within a digital environment in which they send, receive, and interact with web content in a social network capacity (Appel et al., 2019). This is often conceptualized as the biggest platforms themselves and the features they offer, like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. From a practical marketing standpoint, however, social media provides a digital marketing channel that can be used to communicate with consumers via advertising and other content (Appel et al., 2019).

Social Media Engagement Theories

As social media continues to grow and becomes an integral part of many lives, methods of increasing audience engagement on social media have surfaced for social media marketers. Di Gangi and Wasko (2016) outlined the parameters for social media engagement theories that are needed to thrive. First is the assumption that technology plays a major role in social media engagement, as it provides the platform on which the social media is housed and facilitates interactions between audiences. The prevalence of social media could not exist without current technologies, as it is what provides for the unique user experience and environment that is social

media. This experience can be further broken down into two critical components, which Di Gangi and Wasko (2016) identify as experience from social interactions and experience from technical features and hardware. Social interactions consist of the interactions with one another that users create and experience on social media, and they allow for the fostering of relationships among users and transparency of resources on the platform. Technical features are the components of the platforms that allow these interactions to happen, like the ease at which users can exchange and retrieve information (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016).

These parameters lead to the question of why users would choose to utilize social media in the first place. A large part of the appeal from social media is the gratification users get upon using the platforms, which can then be turned into a means of stimulating interactions and behaviors from users by marketers (Dolan et al., 2015). This is known as the uses and gratifications theory, which is rooted in the idea that people seek out media that fulfills their internal needs resulting in gratification, and though it is not specific to digital and social media, the theory finds new relevance in their growth (Whiting & Williams, 2013). The higher interactivity levels of social media in comparison to previous forms of media, like radio or television, bring new light to the uses and gratification theory, as active involvement with the given media leads to even higher engagement, interaction and loyalty levels from users (Dolan et al., 2015).

Within the uses and gratification theory in relation to social media, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified seven major themes that are cited as the most common reasons users choose to continue to seek social media; these seven themes are social interaction, information seeking, to pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communication utility, and convenience utility. Kaye and Johnson (2002) found that these themes, which they referred to as gratification factors, were a

good indicator of reoccurring media use when the gratification factors are received. Using this information, it can be concluded that marketing strategies that target fulfilling gratification factors will be effective in gaining new customers via social media as well as satisfying current customers and their needs.

Fan Engagement Theory

A separate, though related, theory to social media engagement theory is fan engagement theory, which is a critical factor in the development and maintenance of sports at all levels. Fan engagement in the context of sports refers to the deep psychological connection fans feel to their team, and this level of loyalty can be utilized by marketers to create an effective digital strategy (Stander et al., 2016). Fan engagement theory encompasses far more than digital marketing strategies, but social media and other online presences of the team play a large role in the effectiveness of overall fan engagement. Sports fans typically form a different relationship with their team than is typically found between a consumer and a product, often resulting in heightened levels of loyalty and a higher tolerance threshold for lower performance, as the emotional connection to the team is of utmost importance (Abosag et al., 2012). Given these changes to the relationship dynamic between customers and organizations in sports, sports teams are therefore placed in an ideal position to utilize social media as a means of increasing and promoting fan engagement.

Sports clubs are increasingly investing in social media as it grows in prevalence and popularity, but many fans have found that teams still lack in ability to form more intimate relationships with fans online. This is assumed to be due to the complicated balance between cultivating meaningful relationships with the fanbase while still maintaining control over the company brand (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). This balance is the key to relationship marketing,

which is a major factor in the ultimate success of social media strategies within sports.

Relationship marketing is any set of activities that contributes toward establishing and maintaining a positive relationship exchange between companies and customers (Steinhoff et al., 2018), and is one of the major contributors to the success, or lack thereof, of social media strategies within sports. This can be done through effective utilization of various communication platforms, most namely social media. Social media is becoming the ideal for relationship marketing platforms as they encourage dialogue among users about numerous topics, including the sports teams they love. Sports marketers can take advantage of this and not only insert themselves within these public conversations when applicable, but also post things themselves that encourage dialogue among followers and increase follower reach with the goal of positively influencing consumer perceptions of the brand (He et al., 2021).

Within the realm of forming relationships between brands and consumers is the concept of transactional versus non-transactional behavior online. Transactional behaviors online are behaviors which are made with the direct intent of driving a specific action, like completing a purchase or some other call to action. Non-transactional behavior is any action that is more casual and made beyond the intention of driving a specific action, but rather are made in pursuit of connections and relationships online (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013). Though both transactional and non-transactional behaviors have their place within social media interactions, creating a balance between the two allows consumers to feel more connected to the brand. This impacts their future choices regarding purchasing decisions and personal support of the brand, which affects the long-term brand perception and customer awareness of the brand since, especially with the rise of social media, customers are increasingly well-informed and socially connected (Cambrá-Fierro et al., 2021).

Distinctions of Social Media within Sports Marketing

Though social media is undoubtedly an important tool within the sports marketing arsenal, it is important to be able to understand how to use it effectively within the sports environment, as sports differ from many more traditional industries. For example, one of the biggest differences is that the performance of the “product,” also known as the team, is not only openly observable by anyone, but the marketing team and other stakeholders within the organization have no control over it (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2020). In addition, the concept of conversion is to be understood differently within the sports context compared to other industries, as many fans are so deeply loyal to their teams that this loyalty has become a form of selfidentity (Karjaluo et al., 2016). Because of this, converting current fans of another organization can be considered a nearly impossible task, as fans who are that deeply intertwined with their team are incredibly unlikely to change their loyalties. However, the other side to this unique characteristic is that such fans are much more inclined to buy team merchandise, attend team events, and be receptive to sponsors of the team.

In addition, Kaynak et. al (2007) noted that sports marketing truly includes two separate aspects, which are marketing *of* the sport and marketing *through* the sport. Marketing of the sports is the promotion of team games, performance, merchandise, concessions, and other directly related promotions. Marketing through the sport involves utilizing the team and their following as an asset for sponsors to come in and reach that audience, and curating the team’s marketing in order to maximize the effectiveness of sponsorship efforts (Koronios et al., 2020). This is a rather unique aspect of sports that involves careful consideration for all parts of sports marketing, but finds new importance with the emergence of social media and its use as a platform for the promotion of both sides of sports marketing.

Expanding on this concept, sponsor partnerships and sports are now so prevalent that they are nearly inseparable from each other, and social media has created an additional platform for sponsorships to be effective. Brand sponsorship via social media can be a very effective and efficient way to improve the quality of relationships with consumers and communicate with them more accurately (Do et al., 2015). Crompton (2007) noted that sponsorship inherently is linked to the communications process, as it is a platform focused on the message of multiple other promotional tools. Crompton added that because sponsorship typically spans across a multitude of platforms over a longer period of time, it can be difficult to assess the true effectiveness of a particular sponsorship endeavor. However, Chih-Hung Wang et al. (2012) found in their study that sponsorship is an effective marketing tactic because identification with the sponsored team led to increased purchasing intention of the sponsoring goods. This cause-and-effect relationship can therefore be utilized in different marketing strategies to further grow the reach of the team.

Sports Branding and Social Media

Branding is an essential function of any business or organization, and sports is no exception. Sports branding is an extension of traditional branding, which includes assets such as name, logo, color, and brand performance which aim to be easily recognizable and evoke positive and reliable emotions for the consumer (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019). Specifically within sports, Jankovic and Jaksic-Stojanovic also noted that sports branding specifically embodies a unique identity that allows the organization to be actively remembered by consumers and provide value in increasing the revenue of the organization. Social media has provided new grounds to reinvent and reinforce current sports branding strategies due to its ability to reach a wide array of consumers on a consistent basis. This allows for an increase in brand awareness, which is the familiarity and recognizability of a brand to the general public as

well as the target audience (Foroudi, 2019). Social media is able to increase overall brand awareness in various ways due to its virtual interactivity and ability to share information efficiently (Barreda et al., 2015).

Brand management within sports takes a slightly different approach in some aspects when compared to traditional brand management. For example, poor performance, especially on a consistent basis, is typically something that is both rare and difficult to work with in maintaining a professional and appealing image in traditional industries, but can be considered a common occurrence and standard practice within sports (Nuhler et al., 2016). This is because teams may frequently find themselves in a season with subpar performance, which makes it challenging to create and plan content that appeals to the fans and keeps them happy despite the team's poor performance on the field. However, this highlights the importance of strong brand management and awareness within sports, and the ability to ensure that social media performance remains strong when the team cannot.

Crisis Management in Sports Marketing

A thorough crisis management plan is a crucial aspect of any social media plan, but takes special importance in sports due to the volatility of the industry. Traditional crisis management is the management of disasters, either natural or manmade, which has the potential to cause significant damage to human life or the environment (Mitroff et al., 1987), though today this definition is effectively expanded to include events that devastate team image or reputation as well. This can include a plethora of events, such as player or coaching misconduct, extreme injury of an athlete during play, venue-related issues, management scandals, or social justice activism, and in the modern era, addressing them via social media channels is expected by both fans and the general public. One of the benefits of social media in this situation is the immediacy

in which information is distributed (Saroj & Pal, 2020), as this allows for the company to release a statement as quickly and appropriately as possible while also enabling the other elements of their crisis management plan to be executed swiftly. Saroj and Pal (2020) also noted that this proves to have negative effects as well, as this fast-moving information allows for incorrect and potentially harmful information about the crisis to be spread by others extremely quickly.

Crisis management strategies within sports is a necessary function of any marketing and public relations plan, as failure to properly address any controversy can have detrimental effects on the organization. An effective crisis management plan will be able to manipulate the way in which both the crisis and the organization are perceived by the audience, as this can significantly impact the overall response to the crisis. LaGree et al. (2019) examined the National Football League (NFL) and their response to a crisis involving the frequency of concussions for athletes in the league. The researchers found that in examples where the crisis was framed as a result of accidents, the audience response was more sad and frightened when compared to instances where the same crisis was framed to be as a result of an equipment failure. In addition, this same study noted that audiences reacted more positively to crisis management that was focused on proactive responses rather than reactive ones, like implementing new safety rules to prevent concussions in the first place, which were perceived more positively by audiences than reactive responses to crises that had already occurred.

Social Media Strategies in Sports Marketing

Though social media within sports requires some different approaches than in other industries, many standard social media strategies can be used or modified to be incredibly effective tools within sports marketing. One of these strategies is content marketing, which is defined by the Content Marketing Institute (n.d.) as the marketing approach which utilizes

strategic content creation to drive consumer engagement. Though social media is an immensely versatile tool that allows for multiple forms of communication, the primary content itself that is posted is often seen as the most important component. Social media marketing cannot function as a whole without the organization itself offering content to post, making consistent, appealing, and informative content the backbone of many social media marketing strategies (Ahmad et al., 2016). Part of the appeal of content marketing is that it is not only an incredibly versatile and wide-reaching social media strategy, but it can also be used to encourage a variety of different behaviors from consumers. One of these behaviors is brand loyalty, and although loyalty within sports looks different compared to other industries, content marketing can still be used to encourage consumers to remain loyal to their team. Content marketing can be used to invoke an emotional connection to the brand or a perceived personal relationship to the team or organization, creating a feeling of closeness and a sense of value and community for the consumers (Gumus, 2017).

Another social media strategy within sports is a series of fan engagement initiatives, which is a derivative of traditional customer engagement strategies modified to be more effective in the sports environment. Customer engagement is any activity by the customer directed at the organization (Pansari & Kumar, 2016), and within sports more specifically emphasizes the nontransactional behavior of consumers who are dedicated to the organization (Pandita & Vapiwala, 2023). As sports often elicit an exciting sense of immediacy and highly engaged emotions, sports marketers want to capitalize on this to keep these emotions associated with the team with the goal of maintaining fan engagement and focus (Casper et al., 2020). Fan engagement can take place in a multitude of forms both online and offline, but in the context of social media, efforts to keep fans deeply ingrained within team happenings and capitalizing on

successes within the organization can help to maximize the positive benefits of fan engagement within sports (Huettermann et al., 2019).

A growing aspect of social media that is recently gaining more traction is user-generated content, often referred to as UGC. UGC is not necessarily a new form of content, but is finding new life on social media within recent years. UGC is defined as digital content created by the general public rather than by hired content professionals and provides social media users with new perspectives offered by people not in direct affiliation with the organization (Daugherty et al., 2008). This content can take a variety of forms, including blogs, personal anecdotes, and video or photo content. With UGC comes the need to understand how consumers process information coming from mainstream media versus non-traditional media sources. The researchers of one study found that within sports, fans did not perceive there to be a significant difference in trustworthiness between mainstream media and non-traditional sources, which can be both good and bad for the organization (Kwak et al., 2010). This is beneficial because it means that teams can likely find it useful to outsource some of their content to others outside of the organization, like reposting photos fans have taken at a game or other team event. On the other hand, however, fans may come across a piece of negative media created by nonprofessionals within the industry and see it as reliable information, despite it not necessarily being accurate. UGC also presents additional challenges, particularly concerning the legal implications of its use. UGC can present a slew of legal challenges regarding intellectual content and copyright usage, as the content is owned by the creator rather than the organization who posts it (Carlisle & Scerri, 2007). Carlisle and Scerri also noted that UGC, by nature, invites undesirable content to be produced and posted for public viewing due to the fact that anyone can create the content and paint the organization in a negative light if they so desire. UGC can be a

very valuable tool within sports when it is understood properly, and can provide valuable insights and new perspectives to fans that the organization itself may have otherwise been incapable of providing.

A less straightforward, but nonetheless crucial, strategy for sports social media is the concept of storytelling. Storytelling, at its core, is an interaction between a listener and a narrator with the listener consuming the story that the narrator details (Pera & Viglia, 2016). In social media, storytelling is used in the sense that the content posted and promoted by the social media constructs both story content within each individual post, but also the overall story of the organization over the course of the entirety of the social media page. Storytelling can be used to both enhance the overall message of the brand as well as bring additional value to the consumer, as it often invokes empathy or other similar emotions and has a higher likelihood of being remembered by the consumer (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). One study also found that video storytelling can have a more profound effect on listeners than written storytelling online, which makes social media a prime platform to include and encourage storytelling via video content (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

Opportunities for Future Research

Research did not reveal any existing literature on the use of social media in junior hockey, with minimal literature on the use of social media to promote amateur athletics being found. Though research was found in relation to other effects of social media within amateur sports, like how it affects athlete confidence or performance, literature on the use of social media by amateur sports organizations for promotional purposes was slim. Future research into the benefits of social media specifically in relation to amateur sports could be extended, as such use of social media will likely include its own set of challenges like a significantly more restrictive budget,

more difficulty attracting sponsors, less access to quality resources for content creation like photography, videography or graphic design, and a greater need to appeal to additional audiences like the parents of athletes in addition to the fans and the athletes themselves. This leads to the development of a social media strategy for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights, aiming to answer the question, “How does the utilization of different social media platforms impact the engagement levels and fan interaction, and what are the most effective strategies for each platform?”

Social Media Plan for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights

The following social media plan has been developed and curated specifically for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights, taking into consideration the needs and resources of the team, common social media strategies within sports, current social media presence, and the team’s unique audience demographics.

Analysis of Current Social Media Presence

The Knights’ social media presence is currently adequate given the level of hockey the team plays, with frequent posts about relevant topics to the audience. Their primary platforms are Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook, the team has acquired over 1,500 page likes and 1,800 page follows since June 2019 ("Wilkes-Barre / Scranton Knights Hockey," n.d.), while their Instagram has acquired nearly 3,000 followers since February 2021 ("WBS Knights [@wbsknights]," n.d.). As Instagram is their larger platform, it will be used for comparison of a random sample of other teams in the USPHL, as shown in Table 1, to determine their standing within the social media ranks. For comparison, the San Diego Sabers (formerly the San Diego Gulls) currently have just over 3,000 followers since August 2013 ("San Diego Sabers

[@usphlsabers]," n.d.), the Carolina Junior Hurricanes have over 3,200 followers since March 2019 ("Jr Canes USPHL [@jrcanesusphl]," n.d.), and the Florida Eels have accrued just over 2,400 followers since February 2020 ("Florida Eels_USPHL [@floridaeels_usphl]," n.d.). All follower counts are as of March 03, 2024.

Table 1

Instagram Follower Count Comparison between Randomly Chosen USPHL Teams

Team	Follower Count
Wilkes Barre-Scranton Knights	2,990
San Diego Sabers	3,079
Carolina Junior Hurricanes	3,253
Florida Eels	2,450

SWOT Analysis

Using this information, as well as the content posted on the Knights' social media pages, a SWOT analysis (found in Table 2) can be created to determine the best course of action for a future social media plan. A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool that contributes to decision making for organizations, and is commonly used within business and marketing (Büyüközkan & Ilıcak, 2019). The Knights' strengths include effective use of graphic visuals, as their social media pages are very graphic-heavy which can be a very effective way to communicate information to the audience. Through these graphics as well as their other social media content, they have established a very strong brand identity through consistent use of colors, logos, and the tone of their posts. This leads to consistent brand messaging, another

strength and a great asset as the team is able to consistently communicate their values and mission while reinforcing a positive brand image perception.

One of the Knights' biggest current weaknesses is a lack of variety of content. Their recent posts on Instagram from this season are almost exclusively graphics-based, with little inclusion of photo or video content. Content variety is a very important aspect of content marketing, as it encourages the audience to remain engaged (Schaefer et al., 2021) and allows for different types of posts, like highlight reels or behind-the-scenes content, which can deepen the audience's connection to the team. Inclusion of a wider variety of content in the updated social media plan can help with increasing the engagement on their posts. In addition, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on sponsorship within the team, both in terms of promoting current sponsors and working to gain new sponsors. Increasing the priority of sponsorship-focused posting could help the team bring in more revenue while also creating more content to keep fans engaged.

Opportunities for the Knights within social media are plenty, but one of the biggest ones could be to leverage newer social media platforms like Tiktok. Video content is across the board becoming very popular due to its tendency to draw higher engagement (Liu et al., 2019), so capitalizing on platforms that prioritize video content could help to increase the team's reach and push them to get creative in incorporating wider varieties of content. In addition, they may want to expand on their current team merchandise line and how it is promoted on social media. Utilizing social media like an e-commerce platform, when applicable, can help boost sales of team merchandise which then spreads more awareness about the team.

The final aspect of a SWOT analysis, threats, include primarily algorithm changes by social media platforms. Algorithms are constantly evolving in order to push new types of content

to consumers (DeVito et al., 2017), which can harm a social media team that does not carefully keep track of new changes and alter content in order to give it the best chance to succeed.

Thorough research into the current state of the algorithm for Facebook and Instagram can help combat low engagement for posts, as well as tracking alterations to the algorithm so that new content can align with its preferences and be pushed to a wider audience. In addition, though there was no indication that the Knights have a poor crisis management plan in place, solidifying one in the upcoming social media strategy will be of great benefit, so failure to do so serves as a significant threat for the team.

Table 2

SWOT Analysis for the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights' Current Social Media Presence

Category	Characteristics
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective use of graphic visuals • Strong brand reinforcement
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little content variety • Lack of sponsorship-focused posting
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging newer social media platforms • Expand team merchandise advertising
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Algorithm changes on social media • Lack of identified crisis management plan

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of the proposed social media strategy are designed to represent the overarching desired outcomes of the plan, with specific, measurable steps to take in order to achieve them. The first goal of the social media strategy is to increase brand visibility and awareness of the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights. This includes sub-goals of increasing follower count by ten percent over the course of the next six months starting at the beginning of the season, and boosting brand awareness through tags in posts by 20% in the same time frame through engaging content and interactive material on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

The second goal of the social media strategy is to improve overall fan engagement, as fan engagement heightens the overall sports experience for all parties involved. This will involve objectives that relate to engagement both online and offline. In order to achieve this, the Knights will aim to increase the average engagement (consisting of likes, shares, and comments) by twenty percent through the first half of the upcoming season, which is approximately a sixmonth time span, as well as aim to increase team mentions on social media by 15% in the same time frame through brand recognition campaigns. These goals will contribute to the overall brand visibility and awareness on social media, allowing for further audience reach and greater brand awareness for the team.

The third and final goal for the social media campaign will relate to increasing ticket sales and attendance at home games for the Knights. This will involve a sub-goal of increasing online ticket sales by 15% through the first half of the regular season through social media campaigns, as well as promoting a 10% overall increase in attendance in that time frame. These goals were chosen as they are realistic given the team's current performance and their level of play.

Together, these goals outline a framework for improvement for the Knights and give the team specific, measurable goals to move toward in their upcoming social media campaign as well as future campaigns.

Target Audience and Competitor Analysis

Target Audience

In order to begin formulating the social media strategy to achieve the stated goals, the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights must first identify their specific target audience. The purpose of identifying the target audience is to ensure that the marketing team has the correct foundation in order to create a plan and materials that are of value to the consumer and provide a framework for effective strategic marketing (Weinstein, 2014). Though specific target audience information and data within junior hockey was not found, data in regards to the target audience within pro hockey was available, finding that hockey fans were 63% male, 37% female, and 40% under 50 years old in 2022, with a 26% increase in the number of female fans since 2016 ("NHL seeing growth in female and young fans," 2022).

In addition, the demographics of the Wilkes-Barre area were examined, finding that the gender split within the city's total 2022 population of 44,261 was 51.0% female and 49.0% male, with 22.6% of the population being under 18 years old and 15.3% of the population being over the age of 65 ("QuickFacts: Wilkes-Barre city, Pennsylvania," 2022). Given this demographic information and the information published about general hockey fan demographics, it can be inferred that the Knights' target demographic within their city will consist of approximately 8,424 Wilkes-Barre residents who are between the ages of 18 and 65 and are already self-described fans of hockey. In addition, the Knights' secondary target market will consist of prospective players and the parents of both current and prospective players, who are not

necessarily local to the Wilkes-Barre area. Though many players on the roster come from the state of Pennsylvania, many others travel from states across the U.S. and even from abroad to play for the team ("Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights Roster," 2023). Due to this, it is also important to keep potential players and their parents in mind during the execution of the social media strategy, as social media can be used as a tool in recruitment and commitment considerations.

Competitor Analysis

The primary competitor for the Knights will be twofold, as the competitors will differ for each primary segment of the target market. For the segment classified as attending fans, that is those who are local to Wilkes-Barre and call themselves hockey fans, the primary competitor will be the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Penguins, the American Hockey League (AHL) affiliate of the National Hockey League's (NHL's) Pittsburgh Penguins. The AHL Penguins, due to the fact that they are in a professional league as opposed to an amateur league like the Knights, boast a significantly larger fanbase and ability to draw fans to games. It is natural that they will receive significantly more recognition and support within the community, and given that the Penguins have an Instagram following of over 67,000 ("Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins [@wbspenguins]," n.d.), it is safe to assume that this is the case.

For the primary competitor in regards to the player and parent audience, the Knights will be competing with a number of junior hockey teams in their own league and other leagues of a similar skill level all across the country. Because of this, it is difficult to determine a specific team or organization that will serve as the Knights' primary competitor for this audience. Other teams in the United States Premier Hockey League (USPHL), as well as teams in the North

American 3 Hockey League (NA3HL), Eastern Hockey League (EHL), and the North American Hockey League (NAHL) will be the primary competitors as they play at a similar level of hockey across the United States and will be in the market for the same level of players and talent as the Knights. Developing a plan that is competitive with a variety of teams in different locations will be the best strategy for the Knights.

Content Strategy

Content Strategy Goals and Objectives

In order to achieve a successful content strategy plan, it is important for the Knights to outline some clear goals and objectives that the plan aims to achieve. Many of these content strategy goals will align with the goals of the overall social media plan that have already been established by the team. The first of these objectives will be to develop and adhere to a content calendar, which will ensure that a minimum of three posts per week are submitted across all platforms and that posts align with important events and promotions on the team's schedule. Though the Knights' current posting schedule is not inconsistent, there is room for improvement in terms of the variety of content posted and the development of a content calendar can help flesh out new ideas and when they will be posted, as well as identify gaps in which there are no events or promotions so that the team can brainstorm more creative content to fill in.

The second goal is to implement platform-specific content strategies in order to maximize what features are offered by each platform and the reach they will provide to the audience. Currently, the team posts the same content across all platforms, which does not utilize the unique features offered by each platform in order to maximize content offerings. To achieve this, the social media strategy will contain goals to incorporate behind-the-scenes content via Instagram

stories and real-time game updates via Twitter. Through these implementations, the team hopes to see an overall increase in engagement of 20%.

The Knights' third goal is to create a user-generated content campaign, as their current social media strategy does not include any content created and posted by fans. This campaign will encourage fans to post photos of themselves attending games and tagging the team, who will then repost the photos. To do this, the team will implement monthly photo contests, where any photos posted by fans in regards to the team will be entered into a monthly giveaway. The giveaway will provide extra incentive for fans to participate, increasing the number of UGC entries the team is provided with. This user-generated content will contribute to the team's goal of increasing team mentions on social media by 15% by the end of the regular season, as well as contribute to increasing overall ticket sales as more fans will be encouraged to attend games in order to enter the giveaways.

The final goal for the Knights' social media strategy is in regards to their analytics, as currently there is no evidence that the team has implemented a robust analytics measurement tool in order to track content performance on social media. In order to achieve this goal, the Knights' will set key performance indicators (KPIs) such as reach, total engagement, follower counts, and conversion rates, and produce a monthly report on each of them in order to determine the status of the social media plan's effectiveness. These monthly reports will allow the Knights to keep track consistently of their content effectiveness and give them the ability to adjust their strategies accordingly.

Content Themes and Types

Gaining and maintaining the interest of the audience lies in consistently creating diverse and engaging content on social media. Though the Knights have thus far done well in regards to

posting regularly, their social media content lacks diversity and is very utilitarian, which can get repetitive for fans looking to stay up-to-date with the team. The Knights need to curate an atmosphere of excitement in their social media, which is currently not often present. One of the primary content themes in the Knights' new social media plan will include content surrounding this game day excitement, including behind-the-scenes content, game day countdowns, and fan predictions polls on social media stories. The Knights' current social media presences severely underutilize story capabilities ("WBS Knights [@wbsknights]," n.d.), which can help in generating excitement surrounding game day matchups for the team. In addition, they provide an excellent medium for real-time updates from the team, like videos of the team celebrating after scoring and providing a score update for the game at each intermission and at the game's conclusion.

Another aspect of the social media content themes will be player spotlight posts, which can take a multitude of forms. At the beginning of the season and when new trades are acquired, the team can post player profile posts, including information about each player like their hometown, previous team, and a fun fact. This will allow the fans to get to know the players better and feel more of a connection to the team through such transparency (Richards et al., 2021), encouraging them to attend games regularly. These spotlights can also be done when a player has a big game, like scoring multiple goals or hitting a milestone like playing their onehundredth game. This post can serve as a celebratory post that both informs the audience of the player's achievement and also congratulates the player for their contribution to the team. Player spotlights can also take the form of lighthearted Q-and-A sessions, allowing player personalities to shine through funny answers, and "player takeovers" on Instagram stories, where

a player takes the audience along throughout their day via Instagram stories and provides the audience with another perspective in behind-the-scenes content.

The proposed content types thus far can, generally speaking, be created at any point in the Knights' season. However, bigger events happen throughout the season that may warrant a different type of highlighting on the team's social media pages. For example, the Knights can begin a series that provides exclusive content from the team during events like training camp or the road trip to the national championship. A series covering the team's training camp can document how the team prepares for gameplay prior to the start of the season, and how the team builds cohesion with new players added over the offseason. This also provides insight into the players' physical and mental preparation, which can be a perspective that the audience may not be familiar with that can generate additional interest in the team (Richards et al., 2021). Another series may revolve around road trips that the team takes that are either farther away than usual or are in preparation for a difficult game. This series can capture the team's experiences during away games as well as document memories and team bonding experiences to share with the audience. The team will also need to ensure that they are posting specialty content, which can cover a variety of different occurrences. The most standard form of this type of content will be holiday posts, ensuring that the team sends holiday wishes to fans during major holidays. This can include graphics, personalized messages from players, and user-generated content. However, this can also expand into more team-specific events, like the season opening game and the push for a playoff appearance. These specialty posts will aim to rally fan support, encouraging them to attend games to cheer for the Knights during big moments in their season as well as build excitement and anticipation among fans.

Content Creation Process

In order to execute the content plan for the Knights, it is essential that they develop a thorough creation process that outlines the fundamentals of the plan and gives the team the tools to succeed in the plan. The three primary aspects of this plan are collaboration, a content repository, and an editorial calendar, which together will provide a solid framework for the team to execute their social media plan. As the Knights are an amateur organization, the likelihood that they are able to assemble a team of marketers, designers, video editors and photographers dedicated to the social media plan is low, meaning that one or two people (who may also have other non-marketing positions within the team) will be assigned to executing the social media plan. Because of this, consistent communication and clear role definition is essential, to ensure that content team members fully understand their roles and there is minimal confusion (LinkedIn Community, 2023). This also confirms that all bases are covered, and that there will be someone monitoring every aspect of the social media plan and are committed to its success.

The content repository is a master document that serves as what is essentially a dumping ground for every content idea the marketing team imagines. This document allows for quick capture of ideas for later reference in order to ensure a constant stream of content ideas comes in. It also allows for greater organizational abilities, as content ideas are often thought of, noted down in various different places, and then quickly forgotten. The repository collects all of the marketing team's ideas into one place and allows for deeper exploration of the idea, like what specific audience segment the idea would appeal to and which stage of the buyer's process they are in. This level of organization allows the repository to be referenced and the necessary type of content to be referenced quickly using this information (Kukesh, 2016).

In addition to this, a thorough editorial content calendar will be established which will outline the specific posts the team will push out throughout the season, along with creation and filming dates in order to ensure the plan stays on track. This calendar will outline posting dates for every day during the season and offseason, allowing the content team to determine what types of content will be posted and when, along with identifying content gaps or repetitive content allowing them to adjust their plan accordingly (Needle, 2023). This will also ensure that no major dates in the year are forgotten, as the content team can plug in all game days and holidays and plan the types of content that will be posted for each. Once these dates are established, the content team can then use remaining days to include more creative and diverse content, ensuring that a healthy balance of images, videos, graphics, articles, and promotional content are provided to the audience, and when gaps are still present, for user-generated content campaigns to be pushed in order to ensure that social content is constantly provided.

Within the posting deadline dates, the editorial calendar also serves as a medium to plan for the creation phase of social media content, as this can be a timely task depending on the type of content desired (Needle, 2023). Staged photoshoots, filming sessions, and promotional shoots for sponsors can all be scheduled in, keeping in mind the time required to complete the sessions as well as the editing process to produce the final product. This also ensures that content sessions are planned far enough in advance that any pre-planning required for them can be completed, and any involved parties are notified ahead of time to minimize the risk of scheduling conflicts as well as providing for ample time to ensure that thorough communication is kept with the involved parties to establish expectations and clarify any confusion.

Measurement and Analytics

One of the most valuable efforts toward the success of the social media plan is a dedicated exertion in monitoring and measuring analytics. Analytics allow the content team to determine the effectiveness of the social media plan thus far and provide the team with the ability to make informed decisions moving forward. In order to accurately assess and monitor analytics, the Knights must identify the most important key performance indicators (KPIs) that provide insight into the effectiveness of the plan (Alberghini et al., 2014). Given the social media plan and the needs of the team, the KPIs that are proposed to be of most significance are follower growth, accounts reached, and engagement rates of likes, comments, and shares. The chosen KPIs align with the objectives for the overall social media plan, as they allow for in-depth tracking of statistics that contribute to brand engagement, brand awareness and ticket sales.

In order to effectively track analytics across the team's social media platforms, the team will need to utilize tools like Instagram Insights, Meta Business Suite Insights, and Twitter Analytics to gain a broad overview of the content's performance and reach. The introduction of third-party tools to analytics monitoring can be considered depending on the needs of the team and the social media marketers, but is not required in order to adequately monitor analytics. Data relating to the chosen KPIs should be tracked at minimum once per month, taking note of specific posts or strategies that performed exceptionally as well as posts which underperformed from their expected reach. This information can then be used to modify and adapt the content calendar, as some of the planned future content may not perform as well as expected if previous, similar content underperformed. Modifications to the content calendar and content repository will be required in order to adapt to trends and address any crisis situations, and analytical

tracking will allow for the Knights to remain proactive in regards to their strategies for both (Alberghini et al., 2014).

The specific analytical analyses performed can be classed in three categories, which are engagement metrics, reach and impressions, and conversion tracking (Escudero, 2023).

Engagement metrics data will refer to likes, comments, shares, and overall interaction metrics with the team's content. These metrics will be monitored in order to determine the types of content that generate the highest engagement from followers and fans, providing guidance for the types of content to provide in the future in order to promote success. Reach and impressions metrics provide insight into the overall visibility of the content to social media users, and allow the team to identify the types of content that are promoted more heavily by social media algorithms, therefore reaching a wider span of users. These metrics can be used to determine what content reaches further so that it can be utilized further to achieve the team's visibility and brand awareness goals. Finally, the conversion tracking data provides insight into the effect of the social media campaign on conversions to ticket sales. Though there is no direct method to track conversions, various social media metrics can be compared to ticket sales to games, and correlations between increase in sales and specific campaigns may present themselves. The inferred correlation can then be used to adapt future content with the goal of increasing ticket sales further.

Crisis Management Plan

A critical aspect of any social media strategy is a crisis management plan, which equips the company to properly handle unfavorable situations that arise on social media. A social media crisis is described as social activity with the potential to negatively affect the brand and typically results in a major shift in the tone of conversation occurring online in regards to the brand

(McLachlan, 2023). Effective mitigation strategies are essential to salvaging the brand's reputation, as unaddressed crises can be detrimental to brand reputation. Social media can provide many benefits during crisis situations, as it allows for immediacy of information transfer and widespread reach (Saroj & Pal, 2020). One of its primary uses within crisis management is the ability to provide transparency, which provides multiple benefits in crisis situations. First, social media is one of the first places the public checks when news of a crisis breaks, and the first thing they should see is something that accurately reflects the truth about the situation. Not only does transparency discourage misinformation about a situation from spreading, but it also builds trust in the company when users know that a statement provided by the brand does not attempt to misconstrue or hide information (Fontanella, 2023). Social media can be an incredibly valuable tool for crisis management when utilized correctly, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and thorough crisis management plan.

The steps of a social media crisis management plan are outlined by Fontanella (2023), and consist of identifying the source of the problem, categorizing the issue as a crisis or a problem, and using an internal flowchart to execute actions. The first step is identifying the source of the problem, as not every social media crisis begins online and therefore changes the way that the crisis management plan is executed. In the event of an offline crisis, the first thing to do is examine the current status of the brand's social media accounts in order to assess the damage. If no public comments have been posted, the brand can expect them to come sooner rather than later. Online crises will likely result in an influx of negative social media press nearly instantly, and should also be accounted for. Taking the necessary time to evaluate the environment, attitudes, and actions of users surrounding the controversy is essential to crafting an effective crisis management plan.

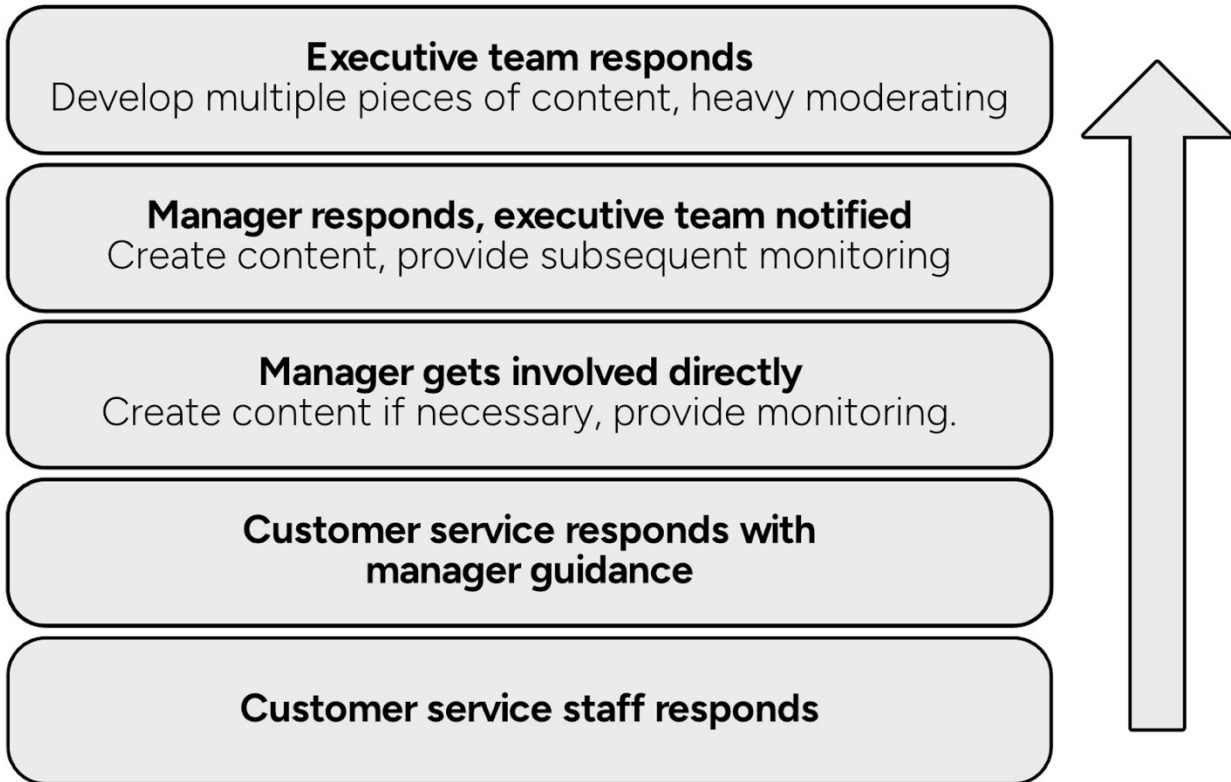
The second step is categorizing the issue as a crisis or a problem, because the severity of the issue determines the types of strategies used to mitigate it. A problem is typically going to be relatively minor and stemming from an issue with a singular customer or fan, like someone dissatisfied with the customer service at the venue. Whether this dissatisfaction is expressed publicly or privately, the customer's satisfaction is of utmost importance when it comes to resolving the issue. In contrast, a crisis affects the larger audience and requires some sort of public statement or intervention by the company in order to prevent escalation (Fontanella, 2023). Correctly identifying the scale of the issue allows the company to formulate the most effective strategy to resolve the issue while satisfying the greatest number of customers possible.

The final step in the crisis management strategy formula is to utilize an internal flowchart (noted in Figure 1) that correlates to crisis intensity. This flowchart will determine who the best representative within the company is to publicly address the issue. For small customer service-related problems, a customer service representative is an appropriate team member to respond.

For larger-scale crises, however, additional measures by higher-up executives may be required.

The flowchart serves as a model for reference in order to ensure that the correct person within the organization is equipped to address the controversy appropriately (Fontanella, 2023). **Figure 1**

Flowchart for Crisis Intensity Response



Note. Derived from Fontanella, C. May 11, 2023. <https://blog.hubspot.com/service/social-mediacrises-management>

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights have great potential to effectively use social media to increase fan engagement and attract higher-quality recruits. Theoretical aspects of sports communication like fan engagement theories contributed to understanding the role social media plays in sports marketing. A robust social media plan was then developed, covering audience segmentation, content themes and types, the content creation strategy, and a crisis management strategy. Data measurement and analytics informed the strategy as well as providing a metric for which to track the effectiveness of the strategy on fan engagement, brand awareness, and ticket sales. An effective social media strategy can greatly contribute to accomplishing goals

and objectives for the team, emphasizing the importance of adapting to new technologies within the sports industry. By implementing the proposed strategies, the Knights can aim to not only achieve their stated goals, but reap the benefits of maximizing their social media presence.

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