A Comparison of Online Marketing and Interaction with Fans through Official Website of Football Clubs in Iran, Asia and Europe

Meysam Rahimizadeh1*, Seyed Nasrollah Sajadi2, Mahmud Goodarzi3, Hasan Ghamati4

1, 4- M.sc in sport management, university of Tehran, Iran
2- Associate Professor in University of Tehran
3- Professor in University of Tehran

*Corresponding Author Email: iran8878@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study was conducted to explore and compare official websites of professional soccer clubs of Europe, Asia and Iran in regard of providing media contents for fans and using online marketing strategies. For this purpose, official websites of all existing clubs of UEFA Champions League (16 teams), AFC Champions League (16 teams), and Iran's Premier League was carefully observed by using a researcher-made check list which its validity was approved by experts and faculty members in sport management area. The results showed that Iranian clubs websites had lowest media contents (4.74 out of 20) and lowest using of online marketing strategies (1.19 out of 20). According to results, there were not significant relationship between providing media contents and using online marketing strategies with ranking of the team. There was a significant relationship between providing media contents and using online marketing strategies among European soccer clubs (P<0.035). In other words, providing media contents through club website was a prelude to marketing merchandises and services of club and obtaining financial benefits.

Keywords: Marketing, Internet, Sport, Soccer, Football, Fan, Club, UEFA, AFC

Introduction

Sport is becoming increasingly commercialized and sport entities have become more professional over the years. Professional sports like football attract masses and are a billion Euro businesses today. Revenues are generated by media broadcasts, tickets, sponsorships, merchandises, etc. During the last years sport has become more and more global. Sport events are transmitted easily all over the world as media content. Hence, international marketing is getting more and more important for sport organizations (Herbert Woratschek et al, 2008).

Sport companies have to be progressive service sellers in order to successfully compete with other leisure offers. To give an example, they have to establish relationship management activities with their fans (e.g. supporting fan clubs, offering fans the opportunity to communicate with the team) and other stakeholder groups such as their corporate sponsors. One element of major importance within this development is the brand, which is often considered the most important asset of sport clubs. (Hans H. Bauer and Nicola E. Sauer, 2005)

Internet growth, has been faster than all other forms of electronic technology and media communication (Berthon, P., Pitt, L., & Watson, R. T, 1996)

Today the number of Internet users is so much that in dare it can be called the media of mass communication (Snider, M. 1997).

In January 2010, Royal Pingdom reported that the web consisted of 234 million websites with 1.8 billion users. Also a number of sports researchers have predicted that the use of the World Wide Web as a medium for commerce would become a new revenue-generating avenue for sports organizations (e.g. Evans & Smith, 2004; Mahony& Howard, 2001; Zhang et al, 2006). This prediction was largely based on the enormous potential of accessing the vast population of internet users as well as the current popularity of
Sports websites. According to the website of Internet World Stats, the worldwide number of internet users surpassed 2 billion in 2012.

Sport marketing involves all activities that purport to satisfy the demand and desire of sport customers through the procedure of exchange (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 1993).

As sport is the sixth-largest industry in the U.S. with a Gross Domestic Sport Product (GDSP) of $213 billion (Howard & Burton, 2000), it is important for sport marketers to develop new methods for reaching targeted audiences to increase their organization's share of GDSP. If used effectively, the Internet may help.

Pope and Forrest (1997) add that, since the advent of television, this is the first opportunity for marketers to develop techniques for a new communications medium. When marketers began to use television as an advertising tool, ad revenue immediately grew tenfold, from $12.3 million in 1949 to $128 million in 1951. Web advertising revenue grew at a greater rate during a similar period of development, from $55 million in 1995 to $900 million in 1997 (Foskett, 1996).

In the new millennium, many of the marketers encounter with customers by various communication channels. These channels include old channels such as newspapers, radio and television and also new channels like Internet, email and mobile phone. Internet and email are increasingly growing as an important part of the daily lives of people around the world, and because of rapid and extensive developing of electronic media channels, it has anticipated that the traditional communication channels such as television and radio would be weaker. (Danaher, Peter J. & Rossiter, John R. 2009)

Myerescough also cites web applications for corporate profit in the following: (Wen, J et al, 2001)

- Getting information about market
- services relating to E-commerce
- Customer Support
- Sale
- Advertising

Professional sport has already become a billion dollar global industry, and thus it becomes increasingly more important to bring more revenue. (Lee, Jeoung Hak, 2000)

For sport organizations, the web provides access to a desirable target market that justifies establishing an online presence. In particular, the demographic characteristic of Internet users is similar to sports fans. For example the demographic profile of the average internet user, that of an educated, upscale, 18 to 34 year old male, closely resembles the demographic profile of the fan base in the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB) (Jensen, J.1995).

Already sport organizations are through the internet that able to attract considerable financial revenues, current online revenue source are as follows:

- Merchandise:
  The sale of officially licensed merchandise is high-volume, low-margin business. However, offering merchandise online is something that consumers expect. It's also a way to sell discounted merchandise. Most importantly, it's a way to identify your fan base.
- Ticket sales:
  Again, ticket sales are an expectation of consumers. Although the opportunity to sell single-game ticket might not be large, season-ticket holders expect to be able to renew season tickets online and get key ticketing information and policy. In addition, gathering information this way is more efficient, with less chance for error.
- Subscription product:
  Fans are looking to access more content, particularly multimedia content, and are willing to pay a fee. As streaming technology continues to evolve, so will the base of people willing to pay for content. The challenge is the ability for a school to develop this content, which is a resource issue.
- Sponsorship:
  For most sport departments, the size of the online audience exceeds the reach of other media. It's important to create components that allow businesses to associate their brands with athletic department in a meaningful way.

Each of these sources has the potential to grow into significant dollars. While clubs have different budgets and numbers of interested consumers, generating revenue in these ways can lead to incremental revenue growth for any organization. (Stoldt, G.C et al, 2006)

More relevant is the use of an official club site to continue to grow the relationship that an club department has with its most important resource-the fans. College sports fans are the most passionate of all
sports fans. Those fans are increasingly spending more time online and have rising expectations regarding the way they experience their favorite brand-the club department.

The ability to use an official club site to more precisely identify and interact with a club department's fan base will dwarf the online revenue generated by these areas. Using the internet to effectively and efficiently communicate with fans will help clubs departments become smarter marketers and better fund-raisers. Fans will respond to a strong online product, and most are comfortable sharing their information with the club department. These feeling will grow as club departments use the medium to better provide the information and services that are most relevant to their fans.

Consider having a profile of your best customers, including knowing how many ticket they have purchased, whether they have been approached to donate, whether they send their kids to one of your camps, whether they fervently follow a particular team, and whether they purchase merchandise. Sound far-fetched? It isn't-it can be obtained through an official club site.

In a highly competitive market where keeping the attention of consumers is important, the internet will play an important role in revenue generation, both online and off.

New information, appropriate content, and ticket sales, the conditions are necessary for any sports website. Websites not only income but are also to serve sports section of the audience (fans). In the highly competitive market that is very important to protect the consumer, the Internet will play an important role in generating income online. (Stoldt, G.C et al, 2006)

In recent years, attention to online marketing has agenda for many professional clubs and today many professional sports clubs act to sell all kind of sports and non-sports products (Dress and shirt's team, travel equipment and home and bathroom appliances…) so that some online stores represent to sell more than 1000 types of goods for fans. Most of these goods have a higher price than similar products only because of inserting of club logo on the products and so are sold at a higher price, and provide a considerable benefit for club, while it's marketing costs is much lower than traditional marketing methods.

On other hand official website of sport clubs, are the best place for fans referring to get information about their favorite team. This provides a good opportunity for managers of clubs to encourage and facilitate the fans referring to the club website and in addition creates loyalty in fans and increases the club benefit from selling products of club. One way to attract fans (customers) to the club website is, representing online services. These services include a wide range of electronic services, from social networks like Facebook and Twitter to online forums and live Broadcast and a photo gallery and videos. Representing of these modern electronics achievements are very attractive for young, and is the base for more participation in their favorite online virtual space of the club.

According to the introduction, this study was conducted to assess and compare official websites of professional soccer clubs of Europe, Asia and Iran, regarding to provide media contents for fans and use online marketing strategies.

**Methodology**

The present research design was descriptive and survey-like. Data collection method was field-like that by using the available check-list, the required information was collected. This questionnaire was controlled after studying the literate of the research and the authenticity of its connect was proved after the applying the edition and ideas of experts and professor in marketing and communication. In order for a final confirmation of research check-list, the final editors were used. This check-list recorded the type and number of the media contents of these websites by studying the researched sport teams. The media content consisted of 33 items such as photo gallery and video, the possibility of encoding the files by fans, internet TV, Podcast and etc that facilitated interaction with fans through club website. The information relating the availability and extension of these online shopping center that intended to sell the club products through the websites were recorded by the use of the check-list.

The present research statistical population was the professional European, Asian and Iranian football teams that were in high-level competition with their rivals. So, according to the objective of research, 16 teams accepted into round of 16 of UEFA Champions League, and 16 team accepted into round of 16 of AFC Champions League, and all 18 team Iran's Premier League were selected as the research data samples. The research group members by referring to the official website of the mentioned clubs and close studying of all the available pages tried to complete the research check-list. The information obtained from the research check-list after being inserted into computers were studied & examined by the use of Spss software, version 18. For analyzing the information, descriptive statistics were used that consisted of mean, percent, standard deviation and etc. Excel software was used for drawing borders.
Results

Descriptive information derived from review of the club's official website, described in Table 1.

Table 1. Amount of various provide services online by clubs (the percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>AFC Champions League</th>
<th>Iran's Premier League</th>
<th>UEFA Champions League</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of language</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full English website</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predict</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS Feeds1</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum Message Boards*</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games/Contents</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>800 number*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Albums</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Broadcast</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Services</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Audio</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Clips</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop Alerts*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Mail</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback Forums</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Scores</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflects of online services

Instead of percentages, the average is used.

As listed in Table 1, Club Member of UEFA Champions League in all components related to online services in their website had a more favorable situation. Total mean of online services provided by the club's website is shown in Figure 1. (Scale 0-20)

European clubs with an average 14/39, in representing online services to fan's club, were higher than Asian and Iranian clubs. Afterwards Asian and Iranian clubs were with mean 6.51 and 4.74.

ANOVA test results showed that there is a significant difference between the clubs on three continents in online services represented by the club's official website. (P<0.001)

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1RSS is a group of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works—such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video—in a standardized format.

2An Internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages.

3A toll-free, free call, free phone, 800, 0800 or 1-800 numbers is a special telephone number which is free to the calling party, and instead the telephone carrier charges the called party the cost of the call.

4A site map (or sitemap) is a list of pages of a web site accessible to crawlers or users. It can be either a document in any form used as a planning tool for web design, or a web page that lists the pages on a web site, typically organized in hierarchical fashion. This helps visitors and search engine bots find pages on the site.

5A database is an organized collection of data, today typically in digital form.

6Desktop alerting is a relatively young sector of information logistics, where information is sent to an application that displays its content directly on the user's computer desktop.
In the statistical analysis, indicators related to marketing strategies that were used by the website of the clubs are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicators of online marketing strategies of professional clubs Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>AFC Champions League</th>
<th>Iran’s Premier League</th>
<th>UEFA Champions League</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of club sponsors</td>
<td>16.06± 23.2</td>
<td>0.33± 0.9</td>
<td>21.94± 18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of club sponsors link</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betting (percent)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticketing (percent)</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of internet Shop/store (percent)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of club-related products</td>
<td>16.50± 40.1</td>
<td>5.78± 14.8</td>
<td>468.50± 321.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of Other products</td>
<td>13.50± 54.0</td>
<td>4.11± 17.44</td>
<td>0± 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scores of website's online marketing strategies</td>
<td>4.58± 4.17</td>
<td>1.19± 1.85</td>
<td>11.5± 2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 2, in all indicators related to marketing in European club website except sale index of miscellaneous products (Products that do not belong to club), was higher than Asian and Iranian clubs. In other words none of the European clubs in its official website tries to sell unrelated products of its clubs. It should be noted that Some European clubs like Manchester United sell more than 1000 sport and non-sport products through club's official website.

Total Mean of marketing strategies of investigated club website is shown in Figure 2. (Scale 0-20)
As can be seen in Figure 2, Iran's Premier League clubs had the lowest use of online marketing strategies and European clubs with an average 11/55 of 20, were used in most of these strategies.

ANOVA test results showed that there is a significant difference between the clubs on three continents in the online marketing strategies offered by the club's official website. (P<0.001)

At the end for survey, the relationship between online service and online marketing strategies of website of Iran's Premier League teams and also European and Asian clubs, Pearson correlation coefficient separately was used for each test. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Results Pearson Correlation test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>League</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
<th>Test Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UEFA Champions League</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.503</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>significant correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran's Premier League</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.962</td>
<td>No significant correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFC Champions League</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.517</td>
<td>No significant correlation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 3, The test results showed that there is significant correlation between amount of online services represented by the clubs website and online marketing strategies clubs Just among clubs of UEFA Champions League (P= 0.035) and this correlation is not significant among the present clubs in AFC Champions League and Iran's Premier League.

Discussion and Conclusion

In addition to studying & comparing the online services by Iranian, European and Asian professional clubs and the online marketing strategies used by these clubs, the present research by identifying these services and strategies and introducing them to the professional sport management society, has been trying to encourage sport manager to use these elements in their club's website so that by benefiting from revenue provided by selling products and the services through official websites of these clubs the trend of football would soar toward professionalism and independence of clubs. The result of the research showed that there's perceptible different between the website of European, Iranian and Asian clubs in representing online services (P<0.001), and the European clubs represent better online services in comparison whit Iranian & Asian teams (the mean 14.39 from 20) and Iranian clubs represent the least online services to their fans (the mean 4.74 from 20). These result shows that Iranian teams pay less attention to communication and being in touch wit their fans and audience through their official websites. However, making and managing this communication is highly practical in addition to being reasonable, because according to compiling the age internet users whit sport fans (Jenson, 1995). The possibility of attracting fans, awareness about the demands & trends among the team fans and finally impact on these trends & demands, considering the team's internet is easily conducted. The results of other studies show that representing online services by other sport clubs of other majors, such as Hockey, Rugby are much more extensible, particularly among the American teams (Ioakimidis, 2010).

The present research shows that there's a perceptible difference between the Iranian, Asian & European clubs in benefiting from online marketing strategies (P<0.001) and the European teams (mean 11.55 from 20) got the most and Iranian teams (mean 1.19 from 20) got the least benefit from these strategies. 93.8 percent of European clubs represented the links to their sponsors through their official website. However, just 16.7 percent of Iranian team represented the link to their sponsors. 100 percent of European clubs sold their tickets through their websites however, no Iranian team tried to sell their tickets through websites. 100 percent of European team have online shopping in their websites and sold approximately 446 products, however just 22.2 percent of websites of Iranian clubs sold online shopping and sold approximately 5 products. The interesting point is that none of European clubs sold other products than those relating their own clubs. However, Iranian team sold approximately 4 products and Asian sold 13 approximately products in their website that were not related to their favorite club & team by no means. These results might be able to justify the low revenue of Iranian clubs. However, professional sport teams have several income sources, namely right television matches, advertisement around the world, sponsors, museums & shopping centers. In recent years, online shopping centers were added to these income sources but developed rapidly and in case of being in attention of managers have the potentiality of increasing the income of these clubs.

Finally, the result of this research showed that there's a positive & significant relationship between the representing of online services by clubs web-sites and using the online marketing strategies (P<0.001). In other words, among the websites of these European websites, considered as the most professional clubs under study, along with increasing the online services, the usage of online marketing strategies also
increased and vice versa. One of the conclusions obtained from this fact is that online services to fans in club websites can act as an introduction to use online marketing, become by representing suitable online services, more fans are attracted to the club website and spend more time in, which provides more opportunity of representing services and earning income for the club website. However, there's no significant relationship between Iranian & Asian clubs. This is probably due to lack of adequate attention of managers to modern technologies in sports.

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