PERSONAL BRANDING IN TEAM SPORTS MARKETING

SZIKSZAI-NÉMETH Ketrin
Institute of Applied Economics Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary
ketrinnemeth@gmail.com

Abstract: *Nowadays, there is almost no event, no advertisement, without a face of at least one famous person. The involvement of a consciously built personal brand in the promotion is almost inevitable, whether it be a medicine or eyewear brand, or a complete political party. Marketing also plays an increasingly important role in sports. Recently, several researchers have focused on building a personal brand for athletes. The primary purpose of my current research is to demonstrate how a sports team can pursue a marketing strategy based on personal branding. I would like to examine the change in the number of followers, the profitability of conscious selection and subsequent brand building, and the relative effectiveness of its steps. During my empirical study (a 21-day test period), I posted 9 personal branding posts on the Facebook page of the University of Debrecen's Athletic Club's Hockey Team, which were promoted by paid advertisements. To measure the results, I used data from the site and compared them to the metrics of the three 21-day cycles prior the experiment. After the period under review, the number of hockey team's followers on Facebook has more than doubled. Even taking into account the organic impressions (The number of times any content from/about the Team's Page entered a person's screen through unpaid distribution.) alone, the increase was still more than 120%, and the standard deviation of these appearances fell from above 100% on average to below 50%. The number of engaged users (The number of people who engaged with the Team's Page. Engagement includes any click or story created.) peaked and rose on average and became more balanced. Earlier research and my empirical study confirm that a strategy based on the players' personal branding is rewarding and can increase both the follower base and the commitment to the team.*

Keywords: *sports management; sports marketing; strategy; communications; personal branding.*

JEL Classification: *Z29; M31; M37.*

1. Background

In addition to increasing performance, the focus is on increasing brand equity as well in sport. Nowadays, there is no athlete who has no social media profile and the number of people who would not follow others on at least one of these platforms is insignificant. In addition to sponsors and partners, researchers also strive to continuously monitor and evaluate the factors influencing brands. In particular, a quantitative ranking already exist which contains the most influential names in the sporting world; investigating teams, agencies, brands and players on an ongoing

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

416

basis. The presence of more individuals on this list proves that it is profitable for athletes to pay attention to their personal brand, and that this is also in the well-understood interest of the affiliated companies.

Geurin-Eagleman - Burch (2015) observed the private appearances of Olympic athletes on Instagram. Their results show that most comments by their followers are triggered by more personal posts, but in terms of the number of likes, pictures related to their sporting life have triumphed. One of the most important statements made by the authors was that it is worthwhile for athletes to produce content on a variety of topics, but they should devote particular attention to their own sport and profession. And that only increases the effectiveness if they are in the picture themselves. Strategically building an athlete brand will not only result greater commitment to the athlete, but can also be rewarded at sports organizations and events through ticket sales, memberships and partnerships. While in the past, the image of athletes has been dominated by mainstream media, athletes and sports organizations now have a unique opportunity to build their own public figures and brands through the „new media". There is also an increasing tendency for the influence of top athletes to go beyond sport. Not only are they present as a kind of intermediary medium between major brands and customers, but they themselves become "brands". As a result, there are a growing number of agencies dedicated to managing the personal brand of athletes, coaches, leaders and prestigious sports organizations. This type of brand building is also a critical issue for most athletes because their performance is unpredictable, so they want to rely on their brand value well before the end of their careers but at the latest then. It seems obvious to build the brand on winning games and records, who wouldn't cheer for a successful athlete?! However, it is inevitable that these results do not start to decline cyclically over time, so other branding strategies should be considered.

The term personal branding cannot be called completely new, but in order to define it we need to review the basic concepts associated with it. The brand itself is a name, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these, designed to distinguish a product or service from its competitors (Kotler - Keller, 2006). And branding means creating this brand (Moore - Reid, 2008). Already in the last century, reference was made to the personal brand as "the brand called you" (Peters, 1997). Building this is the planned process of bringing the people's brand value to the market (Brooks - Anumudu, 2016). In this regard, Shepherd (2005) stated in the early 2000s that individuals should develop their own branding strategies along the lines of those recommended for companies and products. The "extract, express and exude" principle is also associated with his name when it comes to personal branding. First it is worth summarizing what the individual is really good at, what sets him apart from his peers, then he/she has to disclose these traits, and finally he/she has to start leaking that information about him/herself. Narrowing the term, "athlete brand" has been defined as "the athlete himself or herself, who has his or her own symbolic meaning and value using his or her name, face or other brand elements" (Arai et al., 2014).

Pifer et al. (2015) emphasized that while it is important to research stadium attractiveness, logos, head coaches to understand what engages viewers and loyalty, it is time to turn our attention to star athletes. The unexploited nature of this

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

417

research area is puzzling given that professional teams spend a large part of their budget on salaries and contracts (Deloitte, 2018). By distinguishing star players by virtue of their excellent abilities, they themselves are considered to be brands and are able to translate their brand value into the overall identity of their team. While it may seem clear that the best players are differentiated from mediocre players by their unique qualities, their personality traits vary from star to star. For this reason, the authors investigated through a questionnaire survey the impact of "Hero Athletes", who were stars due to their performance on the pitch, and "Celeb Athletes", who gained their reputation outside of the track. They were interested in the effect these players had on the team's image, perceived quality, brand equity, brand loyalty, and brand reputation. "Hero Athletes" can build on their individual performance, leadership skills, special talents and contribution to team performance when it comes to their own brand, while "Celebrity Athletes" rely on their charisma, attractiveness, cultural significance and celebrity lifestyle. The results showed that managers with a "Hero Athlete" type player in their team are preferred because their attributes are more likely to be transferred to the team's brand value. However, the most profitable players are the ones who are "Hero Athletes" and "Celeb Athletes" at the same time.

On the other hand, performance on the track was a particularly strong indicator of brand equity. After all, winning a match, while bringing valuable points to the team, also builds the brand. But this requires not only getting the best players, but also keeping them. This was the case with Cristiano Ronaldo. It was a big blow when they announced his departure from Real Madrid and his new contract with Juventus. Not in vain, in the days of the justification there were already eloquent numbers in the news. For example, several online sports magazines have dealt with the 10% increase in Juventus shares as a result of Cristiano's arrival, which is even low compared to social media. In the days around the announcement, 1.5 million people followed Juventus on Instagram, 1.1 million on Twitter and half a million on Facebook (Rawal, 2018; Castellanos, 2018). Real Madrid, on the other hand, lost 1 million Twitter followers within 24 hours of the news (Griffee, 2018).

This case highlights two things. On the one hand, even a single person's career performance can influence the financial position of the entire team and the expectations of their performance. On the other hand, some fans will remain loyal to the player and follow him even after a transfer. But all of this suggests that as long as the team has just one such star, it has to capitalize on its potential as it builds brand awareness and fan base.

2. Goals and Assumptions

In my own empirical research based on the literature, I wanted to ascertain the theoretical assumptions. My goal was to increase the number of followers of the DEAC (University of Debrecen Athletic Club) Hockey's Facebook page by 1.5 times thanks to my strategy and budget.

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

418

3. Materials and methods

During the processing of the topic I conducted primary and secondary research. During the review of the literature, I mainly worked with scientific articles, but due to the actuality of the topic, various online sports and marketing articles were also part of my research. During my empirical study, I posted 9 personal branding posts on the DEAC Hockey's Facebook page over a 21-day test period. I chose Facebook to measure engagement because it's one of the oldest social media platforms ever since. 71% of internet users can be found here (Duggan et al., 2015). More than 50% of social media users interact with brands on social media; follow them or join their social network (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Not only did I get posts on the site during the test period, but only those with such content were shared by me. The promotion of the posts as well as the site itself was sponsored by paid advertising. This was because at the start of my investigation the site did not even reach the 1000 fan base and as a result of Facebook's new algorithm about 2% of the followers can be reached organicaly (Digiday, 2018; Falcon, 2018). This would have hindered not only the efficiency but also the representativeness of my research. During the analysis and evaluation of the results, similarly to Geurin-Eagleman and Burch's (2016) research, I also analyzed Facebook data (like, comment) and drew conclusions from the results. Pronschinske et al. (2012) also emphasized the importance of using Facebook data for sports teams and athletes, as this method allows us to obtain obsessive data about actual user behavior (eg. likes). I was able to retrieve my contact information from the DEAC Hockey Facebook page thanks to Facebook's Business feature. Then I analyzed the information obtained with descriptive statistics. The comparisons were based on the data of the three 21-day cycles (7.23 to 9.23) preceding the test period, and compared with the 21-day interval when the posts I wrote were posted on the page (9.24 to 10.14).

In my empirical research I started from the study of Pifer et al. (2015) and I was looking for a player in the DEAC Hockey team who can be both a "Hero Athlete" and a "Celeb Athlete". On the advice of this article, I have already made posts about the fact that he joined the team, and I specifically emphasized what this contract means to DEAC and what it adds to the value of the team. It was essential that the player's value system and out-of-career life represented what the team needed. Therefore, in the posts I have written, I have also highlighted the goalkeeper's studies, his tradition-loving, and family-centric nature, so in addition to praising his productivity at the games, the private posts have also been emphasized. The authors also mentioned the problem that fans who value performance on the pitch more will be loyal to the athlete, and those who are interested in the player's "celebrity lifestyle" will rather be loyal to the team. That's why I thought it was crucial to transfer some of the elements from the star athlete's merits to the team's brand value so that they can be retained even if he leaves. For example, in several posts I indirectly built the brand of the University of Debrecen community (hence the DEAC team) by mentioning that the star goalkeeper not only plays in the colors of the university but also learns there. When evaluating the matches, I paid particular attention to the

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

419

actual effectiveness of Zoltán Hetényi and made the fans aware, as the research of Pifer et al. (2015) proved that the performance of a single person can influence the expectations of the fans towards the team.

4. Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the DEAC Hockey Facebook Page's followers. The start date of the research can be well predicted due to the surge in growth. Before the test period, 980 people liked the page, and 21 days later, there were already 1506 followers, surpassing the 1.5x increase in my goals. Of course, the effectiveness of paid advertising also contributed greatly to this, with 340 out of 534 adhering to the page. 194 followers, on the other hand, came unpaid, which is a good indicator because the number was 94 on average during the three 21-day cycles preceding the study. Compared to this, the page performed more than 100% better during the test period.

Figure 1: Net followers
Source: DEAC Hockey Facebook Page

One of the primary goals of teams on Facebook is to appear to people as often as possible. This can be measured by the number of impressions which is the number of times any content from/about the Team's Page entered a person's screen. This category includes every post, ad, login, or anything that our friends share about that page and it will appear on our timeline. *Figure 2* shows the evolution of this metric and how much of the daily data is due to paid advertising. This is important because paid advertising can only perform well if the content is relevant, but the number of unpaid impressions is a better indicator of the success of a strategy. The numbers have risen sharply since the beginning of the test period, especially when looking at the cumulative value. However, the change is also noticeable in unpaid

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

420

appearances; There was a 40% increase from the previous period, but this rises to 124% when we compare it to the 3 months preceding the test period. Although the start of the season meant great values in previous cycles, this was far from being matched by a balanced number of appearances. The test period also made a difference here, as the standard deviation was 125%, 113% and 68% before, but now this value has fallen below 50%. So not only has the number of impressions increased, but the page has even more consistent performance. While this data is closely related to Facebook's algorithm, which determines to whom and what it makes visible on the timeline, this indicator has proven to be a good strategy for personal branding, and we can achieve greater results than without using the method.
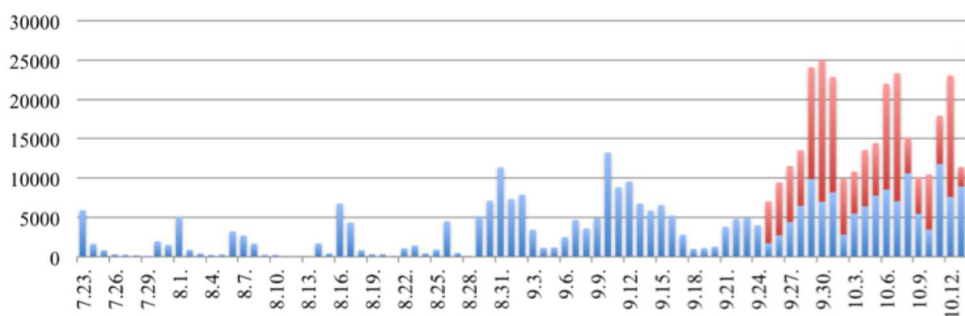

Figure 2: Impressions (pcs)
Source: Own editing

Figure 3 shows the change in the number of daily engaged users, which is perhaps a more talkative indicator of the success of a campaign, because it is not just about getting on the screen, but the human factor is included in the formula due to interactions. This number shows the number of people who interacted with the page each day by clicking on one of their content or by creating a story (temporary content) that mentioned the page. The trend line shown in the figure is created owing to the 7-day average of daily data. The first highs in the last four cycle are attributable to DEAC's first match and then the second wave due to the season opener news conference on the 7th of September, and the season debut in the Erste League on the 9th of September. Then, a downturn followed by a brief stagnation is observed which, starting from the first day of the test period (09.24), starts to increase again and peaks within 21 days without significant decrease.
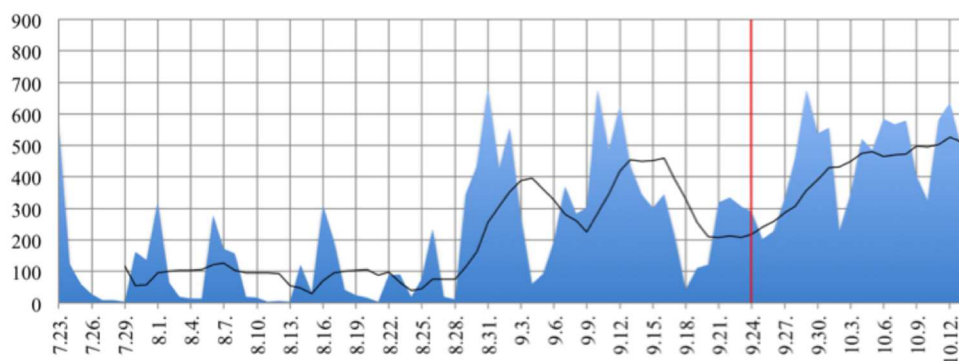
The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

421

Figure 3: Daily engaged users (per person)
Source: Own editing

These page interest metrics support the assumption that using a personal branding marketing strategy will lead to meaningful interaction with people, broaden your follower base, and increase the frequency of impressions.

5. Summary

In addition to results, marketing plays an increasingly important role in sport. Recently, several researchers have focused on building a personal brand for athletes. The primary purpose of my current research is to demonstrate how a sports team can pursue a marketing strategy based on personal branding. After the period under review, the number of followers on the DEAC Hockey team on Facebook has more than doubled. Even taking into account their unpaid impressions alone, performance has increased by more than 120%, and the standard deviation of these appearances has fallen from an average of over 100% to below 50%. The number of daily engagements peaked and rose on average and became more balanced. Earlier research and my empirical study confirm that a strategy based on the players' personal branding is rewarding and can increase both the follower base and the commitment to the team.

6. Acknowledgement

References
1. Arai, A., Ko, Y. J., & Ross, S. (2014). Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image. Sport Management Review (Elsevier Science), 17(1), 97–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.04.003

The Annals of the University of Oradea. Economic Sciences
Tom XXIX 2020, Issue 1 (July 2020)
ISSN 1222-569X, eISSN 1582-5450 📖

422

2. Brooks, A. K. & Anumudu, C. (2016). Identity development in personal branding instruction social narratives and online brand management in a global economy. Adult Learning, 27, 23–29.http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1045159515616968

3. Castellanos, J. (2018). The Ronaldo Effect: Juventus gains over 1.5m social media followers. https://en.as.com/en/2018/07/11/football/1531340686_904280.html (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)

4. De Vries, Lisette, Sonja Gensler, and Peter S.H. Leeflang (2012), "Popularity of Brand Posts on Brand Fan Pages: An Investigation of the Effects of Social Media Marketing," Journal of Interactive Marketing, 26 (2), 83–91.

5. Deloitte. (2018). Deloitte annual review of football finance. https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/sports-business-group/articles/annual-review-of-football-finance.html (letöltve: 2018.10.20.)

6. Digiday. (2018). 'Organic reach on Facebook is dead': Advertisers expect price hikes after Facebook's feed purge. https://digiday.com/marketing/organic-reach-facebook-dead-advertisers-will-spend-reach-facebooks-feed-purge/ (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)

7. Duggan, Maeve, Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Mary Madden (2015), "Social Media Update 2014," Pew Research Center, January 9, http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/.

8. Falcon. (2018). How Will the 2018 Facebook Algorithm Change Affect Marketers? https://www.falcon.io/insights-hub/industry-updates/social-media-updates/facebook-algorithm-change/ (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)

9. Geurin-Eagleman, A. N., & Burch, L. M. (2016). Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual personal presentation on Instagram. Sport Management Review (Elsevier Science), 19(2), 133–145. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.03.002

10. Griffee, W. (2018). The Cristiano Ronaldo effect: Juventus gained 6 MILLION social media followers after mega-move… while a million Twitter users unfollowed Real Madrid within 24 hours of deal. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-6126433/The-Cristiano-Ronaldo-effect-Juventus-gained-6-MILLION-social-media-followers-mega-move.html (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)

11. Kotler, P., & Keller, K. (2006). Marketing management (12th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

12. Moore, K., & Reid, S.(2008). The birth of brand: 4000 years of branding. Business History, 50, 420. DOI:10.1080/00076790802106299

13. Peters, T. (1997). The Brand Called You. Fast Company. http://www.fastcompany.com/28905/brand-called-you (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)

14. Pifer, N. D., Mak, J. Y., Won-Yul Bae, & Zhang, J. J. (2015). Examining the Relationship between Star Player Characteristics and Brand Equity in Professional Sport Teams. Marketing Management Journal, 25(2), 88–106. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=113122315&site=ehost-live

15. Pronschinske, M., Groza, M. D., & Walker, M. (2012). Attracting Facebook "Fans": The Importance of Authenticity and Engagement as a Social Networking Strategy for Professional Sport Teams. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 21(4), 221–231. Retrieved   from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=84558883&site=ehost-live

16. Rawal, A. (2018). Juventus' Social Media Followers Increase By Millions After Cristiano Ronaldo's Signing. https://www.inuth.com/sports/football/juventus-social-media-followers-increase-by-millions-after-cristiano-ronaldos-signing/ (letöltve: 2018.10.15.)