The Marketing of the 2014 Formula One Singapore Grand Prix on Facebook

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Abstract

This study examined the marketing of the F1 Singapore Grand Prix on Facebook. The analysis showed that the social network site is limited in attracting new spectators to the event. Rather, it serves as a platform for spectators or fans to interact with each other, share experience and information, and build a virtual community. The findings suggest that sport event organisers should post on social network sites on a continued basis rather than just during the sports event. This will build up a community of fans who will continue their support in future editions of the event. More importantly, these posts should encourage discussion and sharing among fans.

Keywords: Social network sites, sports events, fan behaviour
INTRODUCTION

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Singapore hosted its first Grand Prix in 1961 to boost tourism and spur economic growth. Although the event was popular and had grown in terms of the number of spectators and sponsorship dollars over the years, the Singapore government decided not to hold the event any more in 1974. This was probably due to several factors including the economic crisis of the period, the rise of illegal racing in the country and the fatalities associated with the event. Since then, there had been several attempts to bring motor sports events back to the country. This was finally realized in 2008 when the Singapore Government decided to host the Formula One Singapore Grand Prix. This event made history by being the first ever nighttime street race (DeCotta, 2008; Solomon, 2008).

The F1 Singapore Grand Prix is more than simply a motor sports event. Besides the race, there are many other activities including street parties, live concerts, exhibitions and competitions. For example, it was reported that in the 2010 edition of the sport event, there were more than 300 performers providing entertainment for spectators, costing more than S$5 million (Singapore GP, 2013). This is similar to other successful sports events in which the main sports event is augmented with other related activities to enhance and broaden the event’s appeal to spectators (Green, 2001). This strategy has proven to be a success as tickets to the F1 Singapore Grand Prix had been consistently sold out over the years (Singapore GP, 2013).

Sports events uses a wide range of marketing tools to market themselves. In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of social network sites in marketing campaigns. Many sports events have also been leveraging on social network sites to market themselves and the F1 Singapore Grand Prix is no exception. However, the number of studies on the marketing of sports events on social network sites remains limited. The aim of this paper is to examine how the F1 Singapore Grand Prix uses the social network site as a marketing tool and draw lessons for marketers of other sports event.

Literature Review

Boyd & Ellison (2008) define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system and articulate a list of other
users with whom they share a connection. Many people are now members of social network sites and as such, commercial organisations including organisers of sports events, see social network sites as a potential marketing medium. It was believed that marketing communications can be sent to specific targets on the basis of disclosed interests and demographics on social network sites (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

However, social network sites are distinctly different from other marketing platforms. The motivation in accessing social network sites is to maintain relationships with the existing network of friends. As such, social network sites cannot be used to promote marketing messages beyond the existing network of relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The real value of marketing on social network sites therefore lies in engaging with the members of the social network to generate a discussion and create a shared cultural meaning of the advertised brand (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010).

Unfortunately, some marketers do not realise that marketing on social network sites are different from traditional marketing. They view social network sites as an extension of their traditional marketing communication tools. As such, the social network site for such companies is essentially a profile of the company, similar to a corporate web page. Social network sites of this type do not encourage a conversation between members and more importantly, fail to engage consumers (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009).

The number of studies examining the use of social network sites in marketing sports events remains limited. Outside of sports events, in collegiate and professional sports, it was found that marketing on social network sites had similarities with other industries. The communication on social network sites was focused on providing timely information to build long-term relationships rather than focusing on short-term marketing activation (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). However, a recent study has shown that fans are still dependent on traditional media for information (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). In addition, it was found that it was possible to market sports products on social network sites as social influence on social network sites can affect consumers’ perception of quality and purchase intention (Chew & Leng, 2014).

This suggests that marketing on social network sites merits further study especially in the marketing of sports events. As such, the aim of this paper is to examine the use of social
network sites in the marketing of sports events. In particular, the study will examine the frequency and type of communication on the F1 Singapore Grand Prix social network site. In addition, it will examine the impact of such communication on the marketing of the sports event.

**METHODS**

There are various social media analytics tools available. However, most of these tools can only be utilized by the administrator or the account holder of the social media site. One of the exceptions is Socialbakers (www.socialbakers.com). The company uses computer algorithms and information from various sources to collect, measure and analyse activities on social network sites including Facebook and Twitter. Members of the public can register on its website to gain access to its software to track and collate data on any social network site.

The 2014 F1 Singapore Grand Prix was held from 19th to 21st September. Following the registration on the Socialbakers website, data from the official F1 Singapore Grand Prix Facebook site was collected from 1st August to 31st October 2014. Data was collected one month before and after the event to allow for changes across the time period to be examined.

Socialbakers was able to provide statistics on the number of fans, interactions and posts during this period. Further analysis was conducted by examining the content of the comments made on the social network site. Details of the statistics provided by Socialbakers and the analysis of the comments are provided in the next section.

**FINDINGS and DISCUSSION**

On 1 August 2014, the F1 Singapore Grand Prix Facebook site had 93,747 fans. At the end of 31st October 2014, the number of fans increased by 7,347 (8%) fans to 101,094 fans. On further analysis, it was found that the increase in fans occurred primarily in the period from 19th to 22nd September. The largest increase in number of fans of 1,073 fans occurred on 21st September, the final day of the race. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The findings suggest that the social network site is limited in its ability to attract new spectators to the event as the number of new fans in the period prior to the event was marginal. The majority of fans joined the social network site only during the race period suggesting that these fans are already spectators and have bought tickets to the event. The reasons for being a fan was not to know more about the event and to evaluate whether to
purchase tickets to the event but more likely, to obtain more information on the event and to join in the community of spectators to share and relive experiences. This concurred with an earlier study which found that members of social network sites were seeking timely information through the site from the organisation (Wallace et al., 2011).

![Figure 1. Change in number of fans over time](image)

Analysis on the interactions on the social network site including ‘like’ votes, shares and comments was conducted as these indicate the level of fans’ engagement with the social network site. A total of 44,109 interactions were made during the period, with an average of 479.4 interactions per day. This is detailed in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2. Number of interactions over time](image)
The highest number of interactions occurred in the period from 19th to 22nd September, with the maximum number of interactions occurring on 21st September at 7,246 interactions. The distribution of interactions follows the distribution of new fans to the social network site. Most of the interactions occur during the race event. This supports the suggestion that fans are joining the social network site to share information and experiences on the sports event.

On further analysis, it was found that 38,502 of the interactions (87%) were in the form of ‘like’ votes. In comparison, there were only 2,019 comments (5%). This is possibly because ‘liking’ a status or post does not require much effort and time. The nature of social network sites favours a quick emotive response to postings rather than a prolonged, conscious and cognitive response. Members of social network sites click on a ‘like’ button without much thought (Leng, 2013). Writing a comment requires cognitive effort and shows a deeper level of engagement. Hence, this may explain the lower proportion of comments as compared to ‘like’ votes.

Fans of the social network site share information and experiences with each other through various tools including posting comments. An analysis of the comments posted on the F1 Singapore Grand Prix Facebook site showed that the largest proportion of comments (33%) were general comments. These comments were neutral in nature and did not encourage further comments from other fans.

“I didn’t make it this year race @ SG. Maybe next year.”- Ariel Manrique

This was followed by comments which made specific references to the race drivers or teams (24%) and the tagging of friends (15%). The proportion of comments on performers was also relatively large (5%). These categories of comments generally encourage other fans to join in a conversation by sharing opinions and experiences. They allow a shared meaning of the sport event to be generated on the social network site.

“Well done Nico, for going to the pit wall and watching the race, not stomping off back to the hotel with your head down and your sunglasses on. You are a true team player, respect!!” - Pratik Jones Khobragade

It was interesting to note that like other social network sites, there were also comments which fall in the categories of complaints, compliments and queries to the organisers. Fans use the social network site as a platform to connect with the organisers. Clearly, it was not only a
platform for organisers to send messages to fans, or for fans to send messages to each other, but also a platform for fans to send messages to the organisers.

“Hi, will the eateries in the F1 Village at Gate 1 be open for this evening’s Pitlane Walk?” - HJ Quek

Although there were many interactions on the social network site, considering that there were 101,094 fans, the level of interaction was low. The average interaction per fan was 0.44 and the average comment per fan was even lower at 0.02. When there is a low level of social interactions or activity on social network sites, it is difficult to create a community and build meaning to the brand. Consequently, the community will become inactive and the advantages of marketing on social network sites dissipate.

In part, this may be due to the low level of activity from the organisers. The event organisers made 66 posts during the data collection period. This is an average of 0.7 posts per day. The most number of posts were made during the event from 19th to 21st September. Again, this shows that activity on the social network site is concentrated during the sports event. This is detailed in Figure 3 below.

![Figure 3. Number of posts by the administrators of the Facebook page](image)

The F1 Singapore Grand Prix is well-received by spectators with many of the tickets sold before race day. Hence, the organisers may not see the need to market the event aggressively on the social network site. The social network site may simply be an additional communication channel for disseminating information to its fans and not meant to be a
platform to build a community. As such, there is little motivation to post aggressively on the social network site prior to the event.

However, interactions on social network sites are important. This is because spectators to a recurring sports event like the F1 Grand Prix will only return to the next edition if they have enjoyed their experience. Creating a community of fans allows fans to share positive experiences and invoke subjective norms to attend future editions of the event (Lu, Lin, & Cheng, 2011; McCartney, 2005; Santos, 2012). When the level of activity prior to the sports event is low, it is expected that interaction levels will also drop as there is nothing for fans to make comments on. This is seen on the social network site of the F1 Singapore Grand Prix.

The majority of posts made by the organisers were photos from the event (62%). On the surface, this seems to be a successful strategy as the photos encouraged 31,221 interactions (79%) from fans. Given that uploading of photos is relatively easy, it will seem to be an effective means to encourage interactions from fans. However, it can also be seen from the above analysis that most of the interactions were limited to “like” votes. In order to engage fans at a deeper level, organisers will need to move beyond simply uploading of photos. They will need to initiate a discussion among fans and encourage them to put in more cognitive effort to post a comment.

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined the marketing of the F1 Singapore Grand Prix on Facebook. The analysis showed that the social network site is limited in attracting new spectators to the event. Rather, it serves as a platform for spectators or fans to interact with each other, share experience and information, and build a virtual community. Unfortunately, this community is more temporary than permanent as the level of interactions was concentrated during the sports event.

It is suggested that sport event organisers should post on social network sites on a continued basis to build up a community of fans. More importantly, these posts should encourage discussion and sharing among fans.

**References**


