Case Studies in Strategic Communication

Recasting Social Media Users as Brand Ambassadors: Opening the Doors to the First 'Social Suite'

Avery Holton
Mark Coddington
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Professional sports teams have struggled to incorporate social network sites into their existing branding and media strategies, wrestling with issues of access and trust. This case study examines an innovative effort by one organization, Major League Baseball's Cleveland Indians, to create a physical space for online discussion about their team. In that space, called the "Social Suite," local social media users were given exclusive access to watch the team's games from a suite, along with access to team staff and information. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation this study found suite users saw themselves not as members of the media, but as active participants in the team's own online marketing efforts. This self-perception corresponded with team executives' goal to use the suite as a way to reverse negative online discussion about the team by creating a network of influential "brand ambassadors" who spread positive perceptions about the organization. This novel approach—one that illustrates the changing landscape of media and communication practice and theory—may serve as a model for other sports teams and businesses as they work to integrate the public into their digital and online efforts.

Keywords: social media; SNS; Twitter; participatory journalism; brand ambassadors; MLB

Introduction

In the spring of 2011, just before the start of their 111th season, Major League Baseball's Cleveland Indians announced they were breaking away from traditional media access approaches and inviting the public into their media sphere. Anyone with a social media account (e.g., Twitter,

Facebook) could apply for single-day credentials[1] that would allow access to a suite on the media level as well as game-day information traditionally reserved for news outlets. The announcement drew more than 700 applications—each requiring a Twitter-themed message (i.e., a tweet) explaining why the applicant should receive admission to the suite—resulting in access for more than 500 Twitter users during the 2011 season. What began the previous year as an unadvertised social media-oriented section in the left-field bleachers called the "Social Deck" had morphed into a social media hotspot called the "Social Suite."

As one of the first initiatives by a United States professional sports team to open its doors to social media users without affiliations to major media organizations, the Cleveland Indians' Social Suite trial offers a compelling case study in the deployment of an integrated social media strategy by an organization operating under traditionally staid approaches to media. Teams across professional sports have paid attention to social media for several years, many of them creating internal departments specifically targeting social network sites, yet the Cleveland Indians are the first to offer some form of media access to the public. How the Indians developed their social media policy and with what goals in mind are important considerations as other teams, and indeed businesses, look for models to follow. Equally important are the voices of those who have been granted such novel access.

This case study explores both issues through participant observation and in-depth interviews with the Indians' social media policy developers and those who interacted with the Social Suite during its first year. Exploratory data analysis of Twitter activity also reflects how, if at all, activity on social media may change with access to the suite. By analyzing policy advancement and the outcomes of the first social media campaign in U.S. professional sports to give elevated access to the public, this study begins to answer questions about the goals of such a campaign, the role of the public in social media discourse surrounding professional teams, and applications to other business organizations hoping to find new ways to successfully work through social media platforms. This study shows that

---

[1] Single-game credentials were typically distributed in order of application so long as the Indians could verify the user was active on Twitter or a similar site. The credential itself was a ticket that allowed access to the suite level, which was tucked among fan suites a few hundred feet away from the main press box.

while social media users may have gained unique access through the Indians' effort, they may be serving less as critical media voices and more as evolving advertising portals.

SNS Changing Communication

Social network sites (SNS) have grown exponentially in recent years, with the two largest sites, Facebook and Twitter, collectively amassing nearly 1 billion users (Gannes, 2011; Facebook, 2011; Smith, 2011). The rapid growth has presented a challenge for news organizations and businesses that rely on elements of communication and public engagement. Additionally, media and communication scholars and practitioners have wrangled with the resulting changes. While there is a general consensus that SNS will continue to alter the way the media and other organizations communicate, there remains a gap between the potential application of SNS and their actual incorporation into business models.

Because this case explores a novel use of social media that could alter current applications, it is important to understand the current uses and gratifications of social media, particularly SNS. However, the case of the Cleveland Indians' Social Suite is not merely one with media implications. Beyond the involvement of news, the efforts of the team also incorporate elements of an emerging area of scholarship that marries the use of SNS and traditional product branding. This budding area of research can help explain not only the importance of SNS to media organizations and other businesses, but can guide research that aims to build on current perceptions of the public's potential role in SNS.

The networked public

A breadth of communication research suggests SNS such as Twitter and Facebook fulfill an array of needs for users, ranging from emotional support and friendship to news sharing, entertainment fulfillment, and political engagement (Baltaretu & Balaban, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006; Joinson, 2008; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011). However, all SNS are not created equal. Facebook users tend to use the platform for entertainment and enjoyment, maintaining and seeking relationships and boosting social support (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011). Those who post links to news and information on Facebook,

though, tend to do so in order to share news and information about themselves or topics important to them (Baek, Holton, Yaschur, & Harp, 2011). This latter fulfillment is one currently driving the growth of Twitter.

Originally envisioned as a mobile means for people to keep up with one another, Twitter has developed into a content-sharing platform largely driven by news (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2011). Twitter users select and share information, often pairing commentary with content, and through this process they find information and sources that best fit their interests (Jansen et al., 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Stassen, 2010). Media organizations have struggled with the incorporation of Twitter, wrangling with issues of trust and journalistic values (Hermida, 2010). Recent research indicates journalists are incorporating elements of humor, opinion, and lifecasting alongside news on Twitter, violating traditional media practice (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2011). These breaches, though, may indeed be driving the successful flow of news and information on Twitter, where users do not simply want content but also interpersonal engagement. Thus, they seek other users who are like them or who can enhance their knowledge in certain areas of interest.

Media organizations and businesses have struggled to make and keep these connections, partly because they have yet to allow for full public engagement (Domingo, 2011). They have also neglected the relationship between their brands—not just their content—and their potential audiences. Scholars have observed the importance of integrating SNS into strategic communication and business approaches such as brand management and brand identity (e.g., Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Brown, 2010; Kumar, 2007). While brand management long emphasized the importance of employees understanding and promoting their employers, the public's role in brand promotion is receiving greater attention (Kapferer, 2008). More recently, the term "brand ambassador" has been applied to employees and other individuals who represent "credible testimony of the distinctive character of the place and its attractiveness, and can through the word-of-mouth effect influence others through their networks and relationships" (Andersson & Ekman, 2009, p. 43). Such individuals can increase brand presence for little or no cost, often relaying important messages to others with little or no incentive.

Andersson and Ekman (2009) argued that the strength of brand ambassadors can be harnessed through "brand ambassador networks," the connections among users that allow brands access to groups that they could not otherwise reach. In this case, those networks were among social media users who relied mostly on Twitter to gain access to the Indians and connect with one another. In a study of more than six million Twitter users, Cha et al. (2010) found individuals with a small number of followers who offer niche coverage (e.g., the Cleveland Indians) have a remarkable ability to get their tweets out to significant audiences, possibly influencing other users. Given their ability to convey important, often positive information about an organization to interested and potentially interested audiences, integrating such individuals into a business model may provide cost-effective marketing.

Such an approach—linking and networking SNS users through a brand—may indeed illustrate a symbiotic relationship where users benefit from information sharing and network development and organizations benefit by the promotion of their brand and their product. However, researchers have yet to explore how such advancements may be implemented and with what reaction from SNS users. Professional sports teams, particularly those in the U.S., have begun merging elements of news media and brand management with SNS, thus providing a naturalistic environment to pursue such research.

Professional sports and SNS

Professional sports teams have struggled to find a fit for SNS users—an area of concern often highlighted negatively in the media. In 2010, the National Hockey League (NHL) proposed severe restrictions on media access for bloggers without an affiliation to a major news organization (Wyshynski, 2010a), and one team was criticized for banning a blogger whose reporting was not indicative of news in the eyes of the team (Wyshynski, 2010b). Similarly, several National Football League teams banned fans and the news media from tweeting or texting during team drills, practices, and other events (Dillow, 2009). A year later, Major League Baseball (MLB) banned reporters affiliated with MLB.com—a limited partnership website among league owners—from tweeting about any topic other than the team they covered (Davis, 2010).

While athletes have readily adopted SNS such as Twitter (Politi, 2009), professional sports teams have been much slower to embrace new forms of digital media (Corazza, 2010; Fromentin 2010; Wyshynski, 2010b). When they do employ innovative communication strategies, teams have tended to take cautious approaches. For example, MLB teams began creating social media departments as Facebook and Twitter gained larger numbers of followers in 2008-2009. The Houston Astros were the first team to make such a move, hiring a former MLB.com reporter to lead their social media department (Houston Astros, 2009). Within a few years, many professional baseball teams were maintaining Facebook and Twitter accounts, according to a recent study of 126 Major League teams and minor league affiliates (Holton, 2011). The content of these accounts typically serves public relations roles, telling users about ticket specials, unique events, or other information to boost the team's public image and possibly ticket sales.

Still, most professional sports teams have done little to incorporate unaffiliated bloggers and social media users. While at least one study of professional baseball showed teams believe unaffiliated bloggers are important to *future* media coverage and to their *future* public image, they placed far more trust in affiliated bloggers or individuals connected to news outlets (Holton, 2011). As such, teams also were less likely to credential those unaffiliated bloggers, essentially holding them at arm's length. Despite recognition of the growing importance of unaffiliated bloggers and social media users, professional baseball teams continue to limit their access—a model most professional sports teams in the U.S. have continued to follow.

Tweets on Deck: A Brief Background of the Social Suite

One of the most notable exceptions to sports teams' wariness toward the incorporation of social media users is the Cleveland Indians, particularly their Social Deck and Social Suite. The idea was conceived during a January 2010 brainstorming session with the Indians' executive staff and sports social media consultant Amy Jo Martin: a reserved section dedicated to local bloggers and social media users, available at each home game, with access by invitation only. After a losing season and attendance that ranked 25th in the league in 2009 ("MLB Attendance Report," n.d.), the team's brand perception was down, according to Curtis Danburg, the

Indians' director of communications. Seeing the growth of SNS, the team hoped to use it as a vehicle to repair its brand. As Danberg stated:

> Not to say we could change the dynamic of everything, but we knew that social media was an avenue that we could engage those people directly and maybe not change their attitudes, but at least have a conversation with them to let them know what we were doing, and what our plan was.

In its initial form during the 2010 season, the Social Deck was a set of about a dozen seats in the outfield bleachers, with a wireless hotspot, TV with the game broadcast, and access to the same pregame notes given by team staff to members of the professional media. Prominent local bloggers and SNS users were identified based on their online activity and readership and were personally invited to the first games in the Social Deck. As word began to spread online, the team began taking applications for spots in the deck.

Following the 2010 season, the team addressed the chief complaint about the Social Deck, poor weather conditions—especially as participants attempted to use laptops and cell phones in the heat and rain—by moving the section indoors to a luxury suite with room for about 14 people. Now titled the Social Suite, the section was advertised for the first time with a press release before the 2011 season.[2] Applications soared to more than 700, though some of the suite's more than 500 participants in 2011 were selected outside the application process through personal invitations from Rob Campbell, coordinator of the Indians' digital media efforts and the Social Suite. The suite featured similar amenities to those at the Social Deck: TVs with game broadcasts, pregame media notes, and frequent access to Campbell, as well as occasional visits from other team representatives, such as the Indians' mascot and family members of Indians legendary pitcher Bob Feller.

The Social Deck and Social Suite quickly drew the attention of both the national media and other professional sports teams. Several media outlets, including *ESPN the Magazine* and NPR, covered the deck in 2010, as well

---

[2] See
http://cleveland.indians.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=201103 24&content_id=17095004&vkey=pr_cle&fext=.jsp&c_id=cle

as trade publications like *Sports Business Daily* (Corazza, 2010; Fisher, 2011). The Indians made a well-received presentation on the concept at MLB's annual industry meetings after the 2010 season and received inquiries from other clubs about replicating the idea following their 2011 press release. By the end of the 2011 season, other teams were offering similar features. The Minnesota Twins, for example, held their first single-game Social Suite in August 2011.

Indians executives consider the initiative to be wildly successful, and the rest of the sports business world has taken notice and begun to follow suit. Noting the potential spread of the Indians' model among other MLB teams, and potentially other professional sports teams and non-sports organizations, it is important to consider the role social media users have played during the formulation and execution of the Social Suite. Early developments reveal trends for other organizations to consider as they work toward integrating the public into social media efforts.

Case Study Method

To examine the Indians' Social Suite trial, we made two trips to Cleveland in July and August 2011 to conduct participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants. Because research in this area has been scant, we employed multiple qualitative methods to analyze the development, employment, and experience of the Social Suite. Qualitative methods with ethnographic components such as in-depth interviews and participant observation can help peal back intricate layers of research (Jick, 1979; Potter, 1996; Rappaport, 2008; Silverman, 2009). Interviews that do not rely on strict rules but rather promote conversation about a certain topic can elucidate in-depth information not readily available in empirical data (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Participant observation can, at the very least, explore emerging areas of research interest and provide preliminary data (Lazarsfeld, 1972). At best, it can help explain, reinforce, and reshape theory, expanding upon or moving beyond quantifiable data by providing explanatory narratives (Jorgensen, 1989).

Noting the relative novelty of the Social Suite and the opportunity to collect narratives from those who developed and experienced it, we used in-depth interviews and participant observation in a naturalistic environment. Five in-person interviews with two Indians executives were

conducted in addition to several follow-ups via email and telephone. We also interviewed 29 Social Suite users within the suite itself and via email and telephone follow-ups. Each of the interviewees gave permission for their names to be used in conjunction with their comments. Additionally, we observed the Social Suite as participants on six different days, totaling approximately 35 hours of observation.

In order to explore the activity of these Social Suite users further, we tracked their tweets on the day of their visit, looking for changes in the volume of overall tweets and tweets relating to the Cleveland Indians. To analyze how this day-of-experience activity related to the users' previous tweeting habits, we used direct Twitter feeds as well as the Twitter archive search engine, TwimeMachine.[3] The average number of daily tweets and average number of tweets mentioning the Indians in the week before and the week following their Social Suite visit were collected for each user. Additionally, the number of tweets and tweets mentioning the Indians were collected on the day of each user's Social Suite visit. These data provided a basis for comparing possible changes in Twitter activity resulting from direct engagement in the Social Suite. Because tweets were gathered post hoc, not all Social Suite users were included. Three accounts had been deleted and two did not allow for historical searches, resulting in an analysis of 24 Social Suite users.

Social Suite Users: Media or Brand Ambassadors?

Many of the Social Suite's users were Cleveland-area residents who were not paid to blog or tweet, but who nonetheless used blogs or SNS frequently and passionately. Some produced content that was primarily or exclusively about sports; others wrote about life in Cleveland more generally. Campbell selected users in an attempt to fit a broad range of Indians fans, from young, social media-savvy twentysomethings to longtime Indians bloggers to the "mommy-bloggers" and their families who filled the suite on Sundays. Many described themselves as passionate Indians fans who love their team (and often their city), and Campbell said he particularly tried to reach out to those invested in the "civic betterment" of Cleveland. However, Campbell said he also made a special

---

[3] TwimeMachine is an open-access search engine that allows users to aggregate the most recent 3,200 tweets from any Twitter user.

effort to invite disgruntled fans as a "welcome challenge" to attempt to restore their faith in the organization.

Users came to the suite with a variety of purposes and expectations in mind, though two particular motivations were especially common. The first of those was the *validation* (and, in turn, the online bragging rights) that came with the opportunity to watch a free game from a suite. This motivation increased with the move from the deck to the suite, which was perceived as more prestigious. With access determined by the Indians' staff, many users saw selection as a level of validation by the team. "This feels more like we're important to the Tribe, that they moved us here [to the suite]," said Anne Smith, a local entrepreneur and SNS user. "I feel like they thought that we were a good asset."

The second factor that motivated many users was the ability to *network*— to meet and communicate directly with other local social media enthusiasts. Danburg said he was surprised at how much of a role those interpersonal connections played in users' experiences. Glenn Moore, a local sports blogger and podcaster, echoed that importance: "Most of the people that come here are my [Twitter] followers, so they get to know who I am, and I get to know who they are. It's kind of like a little meet-and-greet for myself, just to put a face with a username." Interestingly, relatively few Social Suite users said they saw themselves as contributing to the news. Amanda Keeler, who writes for a local community publication in Cleveland, said, "What we're doing here isn't really about journalism. This is about meeting people face-to-face and forming stronger networks of fans. In the end, we're all just trying to get positive messages out about the team and the city." The degree to which this was a motivation for users particularly surprised Indians executives, who created the suite largely to build relationships between themselves and users. They expected the relationship with the team to be the primary draw for users, but instead found that in many cases, the relationship to other users was just as strong of a factor in users' enjoyment of the suite.

While users were content to share the suite with other similar users, they did not seem to change the content of their tweets. The content users produced was quite similar to what they produced outside of the suite, though the flow was much heavier. Using the data collected about user's tweets, paired samples t-tests revealed some significant findings. Users

were typically high-volume posters (M = 3.18, s.d. = 3.01) and included the Indians in their messages (M = 0.71, s.d. = 0.74). They tweeted more on the day of their Social Suite visit (M=5.75, s.d. = 3.59) than on average (t = -6.01, d.f. = 23, p < .001). Additionally, they tweeted more about the Indians on the day of their visit (M = 4.63, s.d. = 2.79) than on average (t = -4.35, d.f. = 23, p < .001). Additionally, they increased mentions of the Indians in their tweets after being in the Social Suite (M = 1.01, s.d. = 1.13; t = -3.78, d.f. = 23, p < .001). While these numbers can only tell us so much—after all, content on Twitter is influenced by many factors—they illustrate a statically significant change in tweeting habits among users. Perhaps most importantly, they point to an increase in tweets about the Cleveland Indians *after* their Social Suite experience.

Yet, the increase in tweet volume at the suite was less about reporting the game and more about personal experience. Much of the content reflected personal observations, photos, and videos from the game experience— both the action on the field and the spectacle surrounding it. For example, on the day of her Social Suite visit, Julia Berkman posted to Twitter, "#SocialSuite tonight!!!!!!!!!! And we're going to the game tomorrow, too. Pumped for my #Indians weekend! @tribetalk." Very little content incorporated the media notes made available to users, and almost none of it could be characterized as journalistic reporting or analysis. Instead, tweets and blog posts could be described as the typical personal accounts of a particularly talkative group of fans sitting together at the game.

That content reflected the way most users saw themselves—as fans, rather than members of the media. Many users said they had little in common with the professional writers who cover the team, and most said they preferred to be treated by the Indians as fans rather than as media members. Even the few users who also held traditional media credentials said they used the suite differently than they would the press box. "I'll be here cheering and booing and being critical or being positive about the team. I'm here as a fan," said Moore, the blogger and podcaster. "I know when to be a fan and when to be media."

The Indians' staff treated the Social Suite's users accordingly: The suite was run separately from the team's media relations unit. Danburg and Campbell said that while there were elements of both, they saw the suite's operation as consisting much more of public relations than of media

relations. According to Campbell, users were free to employ the suite in the same way that professional media members used the press box—as a means of journalistic reporting and analysis—but very few did so.

However, there is one important aspect in which both the Indians' decision makers and the suite's users saw suite participants as more than simply fans being treated to a good time. Because of their selection and preferential treatment by the Indians as well as their relationship with Campbell, many users perceived themselves as representatives of the Indians' brand on SNS, whose role and responsibility it was to counter the negativity regarding the team with their enthusiasm. Several users referred to themselves as an "ambassador for a city," as one user put it, and many of them said they generally try to be positive about the team. Through its exclusive access and luxurious amenities, the Social Suite allows those users to feel as though they are a part of the team itself, as local social media professional and Indians fan Clinton Dugan explained: "If you're out there tweeting with the Social Suite hashtag, and '#Indians,' definitely for the four hours or three hours you're here, you're an unpaid employee of the Indians, basically. And that's one of the coolest parts."

The social media activity following users' Social Suite experiences also supported this self-perceived role as representatives of the Indians within their social networks. Many of the Indians-related tweets following participation in the Social Suite involved acknowledging or deepening connections between users, such as in this exchange between Moore and local social media marketer Clinton Dugan, in which Moore wrote, "And great to meet @rampage_dugan as well last night." Dugan responded, "same to your [sic] sir, hope you had a great birthday." Beyond that, some users employed Twitter as a platform to spread enthusiasm and optimism about the team after their suite visits, such as in Jeff Nomina's tweet to a fellow Indians fan who complained about the team five days after his night in the suite: "As bad as today was, hard not to get excited about future of this team. Lots of youth on this team that will only get better." The suite did not necessarily create this optimism, but by validating it and connecting Nomina with other similarly engaged users, it played a role in encouraging this enthusiasm and empowering it to take on a greater voice.

That attitude is precisely the one the Indians hoped to foster through the Social Suite. Danburg and Campbell said their goal, though unspoken at

the launch of the suite, was to create "brand ambassadors" for the Indians. They see its users not as members of the independent media or as typical fans, but as active players in the team's own media efforts. According to Campbell, brand ambassadors are people "who've had such a great experience or feel so connected, because of the Social Suite, to our brand and to our organization, that they'll go out and they'll do the promoting for us." The primary benefit of this process, Campbell said, is twofold: (1) Those brand ambassadors give the Indians a foothold in SNS, an arena in which large businesses and institutions can be caught flat-footed by fast-moving trends, and (2) they back the Indians' brand with a network of peer recommendations, which engender more trust and influence than corporately-sponsored messaging. "As opposed to the Indians saying, 'Come to Friday's game for fireworks,' it's a fan saying, 'I had an awesome time at fireworks last Friday; you should go this Friday,'" Campbell said. He later added, "That's nothing like journalism or even regular social media. It's brand ambassadors at their best."

Beyond Social Media and Brand Ambassadors

Developers and users of the Social Suite consistently argued that while their voices might funnel through a social media platform, their function is less about media and more about socializing with like-minded people. Privileged access usually reserved for the news media has resulted in an evolutionary use of social media by a profit-driven organization. By creating brand ambassadors who welcomed the role, the Indians developed a public relations strategy out of what began as a social media/public relations hybrid social media experiment. Indeed, the Social Suite has proven successful for the Indians, who plan on seeking user input during the offseason to improve the Social Suite for 2012. "We haven't measured the success yet in numbers," Campbell said, "but we're pretty confident we're driving more traffic to our website and to our games by boosting our interaction with fans on Twitter, both online and offline here at the games." As indicated by their responses, Social Suite users are happy with the suite's setup and eager to participate because they feel validated and linked in with other fans. This symbiotic relationship—one that benefits the team and the Social Suite users—will likely play a critical role in the future success of the suite. "If they don't listen to us," said suite user and local entrepreneur Jessica Styles, "then

everything falls apart. We're happy to be here and happy to support the team, but we want to be seen as part of this and not as outsiders."

Exploratory Twitter data collected from each user seemed to hint at that success, indicating users who visited the Social Suite increased their tweets about the team following their visit. While the data is preliminary, it serves as an indication for follow-up research on the Social Suite and similar platforms that may be emerging. If these numbers, coupled with the sentiments of the Social Suite developers and users, are any indication of success, then the model the Cleveland Indians have introduced is one worth considering. Users may be comfortable serving as brand ambassadors for the team, but such a role can only extend so far without tapping the potential power of networks. Twitter represents a platform where users can both discuss a topic or brand—in this case, the Indians—and interact with others in that discussion. Additionally, brand managers can monitor those discussions, searching for ways to improve the conversation about and perception of their brand. Introducing a personal element—the Social Suite—allows for brand managers and ambassadors to form novel brand ambassador networks that can potentially enhance validation, networking, and trust (Andersson & Ekman, 2009; Brown, 2010).

The Social Suite helped fulfill this function with a variety of users, even some of those who approached the suite and team with skepticism. For users who already held a great deal of trust in and enthusiasm for the team, the suite mobilized them to act as brand ambassadors by validating their influence and by helping connect them with a latent network of others with similar niche interests. But the suite also had a similar effect among organizational skeptics whose trust in the team was quite weak: In at least one case, team officials invited a local blogger who had been critical of the suite to attend the suite, using the experience to build a relationship with him that led to restored trust and posts expressing support for the team and the suite. In such cases, the suite did not even need a baseline of trust or positive brand perception to convert a suite user into a brand ambassador—a testament to the power of the experience to produce brand enthusiasm and influential brand advocates.

These are positive outcomes that may lead to strengthened communication at the very least and increased profits at the most. The

Indians, for example, saw an attendance increase of more than 30% in the first year of the Social Suite. Certainly the suite alone cannot account for such growth—the team won 12 more games than in 2010, offered other innovative marketing and media approaches, and welcomed back fan-favorite, designated hitter Jim Thome—but Indians' management deemed it a successful evolution in the integration of social media, as illustrated by Campbell:

> We see this as an example for other teams to try out.… It's hard to measure success in terms of numbers, but we've gained far more exposure with the Social Suite than we would have if we'd just been sending out our own tweets and posting our own Facebook messages. The relationships we've developed, the brand ambassadors we now have, complement the news coverage we were already getting and the public relations efforts we were already working on.

The Indians accomplished their goal of transforming negative online rhetoric by using the Social Suite as a new venue to create and possibly improve relationships with fans. The symbiotic nature of this relationship fostered by the suite was a key element in its success: Rather than simply soliciting participation from users, the team acknowledged two of their substantial needs—validation and networking—and played a significant role in meeting them. As a result, suite users were pleased to play the role of brand ambassadors that the team desired of them. This transformation into brand ambassadors marks a step forward from efforts at social media engagement in the past, many of which have neglected the importance of a mutually beneficial relationship for users (Domingo, 2011) and, in doing so underemphasized individuals' uses and gratifications for SNS (Lin & Lu, 2011).

Limitations and Conclusion

Weaving the public into a social media structure as active participants is not a venture many sports teams, or non-sports organizations for that matter, have sought. The NHL's New York Islanders continue to experiment with a "Blog Box," inviting select bloggers to report alongside traditional media at games. However, the NHL and most other professional sports leagues in the U.S. continually develop policies that

work against or around the integration of the public. As the Cleveland Indians' Social Suite illustrated, such resistance may keep teams from tapping into an evolutionary form of positive, online-driven branding.

The findings of this study are not without limitation. They represent the examination of one team working with one social media model and thus should not be generalized. Because this study was exploratory in nature, the results relied little on quantitative data which can enhance understandings of how users engage models like the Social Suite and with what effects on their communication, their perceptions, and their roles in the viability and profitability of the team. Future research should explore these areas more in-depth, taking into account the longitudinal nature of communication and successful business operations. For example, analyzing the Social Suite over the full course of the baseball season (162 games, 81 home games) would provide further insight and open more questions than this study yields. Perhaps such an approach would reveal a more natural ebb and flow of tone users connect to a team—one that more reflects the ups and downs teams tend to go through during a season.

Despite these limitations, the findings here provide a better understanding of how organizations can successfully integrate the public into their SNS efforts. Qualitative approaches such as those applied here (i.e., in-depth interviews and participant observation) can help develop emerging areas of research and theoretical development (Potter, 1996). They can also provide insights that quantitative data may not always yield, such as personal narratives and opinions and critical background information such as policy development. These are important pieces of the research puzzle that lead to insightful findings and discussion points such as those raised by the current study. When considered as a successor to traditional media forms, non-professional user-generated online content has fostered serious credibility concerns for both professionals and consumers (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008), but when considered as a peer-to-peer network for recommendations and social information sharing, the same content is seen as highly credible (e.g., Cheong & Morrison, 2008). The Cleveland Indians' innovative strategy views SNS as the latter. Where other professional teams have approached social media users as another form of independent media to be closely guarded, the Indians have conceptualized them as an active network of ambassadors for their brand.

Based on interview data, the Social Suite's users have embraced this role, seeing themselves as valuable assets to an organization in which they are deeply invested, and thus responding with positive messages that have the potential to reach large numbers of people. As social media use continues to grow, other organizations should learn from the Social Suite experiment: By validating their customers' passion for their brand and the online platform on which they express it, the Cleveland Indians turned passive consumers into engaged and motivated evangelists for their organization.

Teaching Note

This case study explored one approach to recasting social media users as brand ambassadors. Novel efforts such as these are still emerging, providing opportunities to explore their successes and failures. As one Cleveland Indians executive noted, the success of the Social Suite has shown up in the amount of traffic the suite attracts, the interactivity it promotes among social media users, and the resulting positive messages about the team. Yet, little empirical data has been collected by the team that could further demonstrate the success of the Social Suite. Data explored in this case showed a collective spike in tweets about the Indians as a result of participation in the Social Suite. The prospect of more extensive research into those messages raises a number of intriguing questions for discussion. What types of empirical data could provide the most value to the Indians? What should the Indians seek to find out through their use of data? What would be the best ways to gather that data? How should they then use that data?

Exploring these areas could also help inform policymakers such as those that appeared in this case study. Twitter is an evolving platform that represents a small slice of social media. Despite some restrictions placed on player tweeting, either by teams or by leagues, teams might be better served by educating their players on the benefits and perils of social media. Thousands of professional athletes have already incorporated Twitter into their daily discourse.[4] Why not approach these athletes much like Social Suite users by encouraging them to connect with other fans? What potential risks and rewards might such engagement invite? Indeed,

---

[4] For a comprehensive list of professional athletes on Twitter, see http://www.tweeting-athletes.com.

college athletes who tweet have come under fire, and in some cases have been banned from tweeting about their teams (Doyel, 2011; King, 2011). Might such action represent an opportunity to educate athletes on Twitter etiquette, much like college media relations departments already do for media interviews? Could early intervention set the tone for more positive employments of Twitter when athletes graduate to professional teams or move on to other jobs?

Digital technology is constantly changing, forcing policymakers to rethink and retool their efforts. Exploring the evolution of social media policies as they occur yields interesting applications for the growth of efforts similar to that of the Social Suite. For example, the Cleveland Indians have yet to encounter much resistance to their approach, but it is not unreasonable to imagine social media users who would be uncomfortable serving as brand ambassadors rather than watchdogs. How should the Indians handle such situations if they arise? How involved should they be in social media discussion about the team outside of the suite?

Beyond these questions, teachers and students should consider the broader impacts of brand ambassadors for the Indians. In what ways could the Indians expand or develop the Social Suite? How can the team make the most of the brand ambassadors they have developed? This case also opens up questions for other scenarios: What would brand ambassadors for other businesses or organizations look like? How might brands without existing fan bases develop a ground-up campaign like that of the Social Suite?

References

Andersson, M., Ekman, P. (2009). Ambassador networks and place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development, 2*(1), 41-51.

Baltaretu, C. M., & Balaban, D. C. (2010). Motivation in using social network sites by 397 Romanian students. A qualitative approach. *Journal of Media Research*, *1*(June), 67–74.

Brown, S. (2010). Where the wild brands are: Some thoughts on anthropomorphic marketing. *The Marketing Review, 10*(3), 209-224.

Corazza, R. (2010). Tribe opens up to social media users. *ESPN.com*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from
http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/thelife/news/story?id=5120106

Cha, M., Haddadi, H., Benevenuto, F., & Gummadi, K. P. (2010). *Measuring user influence on Twitter: The million follower fallacy.* Paper presented at the 4th

International Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Washington, DC.

Cheong, H. J., & Morrison, M. A. (2008). Consumers' reliance on product information and recommendations found in UGC. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 8*(2), 38-49.

Davis, G. (2010). MLB.com bans non-baseball tweets by writers. *Mediaite*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.mediaite.com/online/mlb-com-bans-non-baseball-tweets-by-writers

Dillow, C. (2009). NFL training camps ban Twitter on the sidelines, and in the stands. *Fast Company*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.fastcompany.com/blog/clay-dillow/culture-buffet/nfl-training-camps-ban-twitter-sidelines-and-stands

Domingo, D. (2011). Managing audience participation: Practices, workflows, and strategies. In J. B. Singer, A. Hermida, D. Domingo, A. Heinonen, S. Paulussen, T. Quandt, Z. Reich & M. Vujnovic (Eds.), *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Laden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Doyel, G. (2011). Coaches' Twitter ban isn't stunting players, it's protecting them. CBS Sports. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.cbssports.com/columns/story/15416882/coaches-twitter-ban-isnt-stunting-players-its-protecting-them

Ellison, N., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2006). Spatially bounded online social networks and social capital: The role of Facebook. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association.

Facebook. (2011). Press room: Statistics. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

Fisher, E. (2011). 20 great uses of social media in sports. *Sports Business Daily Journal*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2011/08/01/In-Depth/Social-media.aspx

Flanagin, A. J., & Metzger, M. J. (2007). Digital media and youth: Unparalleled opportunity and unprecedented responsibility. In M. J. Metzger & A. J. Flanagin (Eds.), *Digital media, youth, and credibility* (pp. 5–28). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Fromentin, M. (2010). Leaked credentialing guidelines focus on bloggers. *Sports, Media & Society*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://sportsmediasociety.blogspot.com/2010/09/leaked-credentialing-guidelines-focus.html

Gannes, L. (2011). The four tiers of Twitter users: tweeters, voyeurs, readers and the uncounted masses. *All Things D*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://allthingsd.com/20110908/the-four-tiers-of-twitter-users-tweeters-voyeurs-readers-and-the-uncounted-masses

Hermida, A. (2010). Twittering the News: the emergence of ambient journalism. *Journalism Practice*, *4*(3), 297-308.

Holstein, J. A. and Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Holton, A. (2011). Baseball's digital disconnect: Trust, credentialing, and the independent blogger in professional baseball. Proceedings of the *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference*, Sports Communication Interest Group. St. Louis, MO. August 10-13, 2011.

Houston Astros (2009). Footer rejoins Astros front office: Named Senior Director, Digital Media. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=20090515&content_id=4749764&vkey=pr_hou&fext=.jsp&c_d=hou

Jansen, B., Zhang, M., Sobel, K. and Chowdury, A. (2009). Twitter Power: tweets as electronic word of mouth. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *60*(11), 2169-2188.

Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *24*(4); pp. 602-611.

Joinson, A. N. (2008). Looking at, looking up or keeping up with people? Motives and use of Facebook. Paper presented at the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Florence, Italy.

Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kapferer, J. N. (2008). *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity*. London: Kogan Page.

Kaplan, A. M. and Haenlein, M. (2010) Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, *53*(1), 59-68.

Kim, Y., Sohn, D., & Choi, S. (2011). Cultural difference in motivations for using social network sites: A comparative study of American and Korean college students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *27*(1), 365–372.

King, J. (2011). Time for schools to ban Twitter. *Yahoo! Sports*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://rivals.yahoo.com/ncaa/basketball/news?slug=jn-king_schools_should_ban_twitter_083011

Kumar, A. (2007). From mass customization to mass personalization. *International Journal of Flexible Manufacturing Systems, 19*(4), 533-547.

Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1972). *Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Lin, K., & Lu, H. (2011). Why people use social networking sites: An empirical study integrating network externalities and motivation theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *27*(3), 1152–1161.

MLB Attendance Report – 2009. (n.d.). *ESPN.com*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://espn.go.com/mlb/attendance/_/year/2009

Paulussen, S., & Ugille, P. (2008). User generated content in the newsroom: Professional and organizational constraints on participatory journalism. *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture, 5*(2), 24-41.

Potter, W. J. (1996). *An Analysis of Thinking and Research About Qualitative Methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Rappaport, J. (2008). Beyond participant observation: Collaborative ethnography as theoretical innovation. *Collaborative Anthropologies*, *1*, pp. 1-31.

Silverman, D. (2009). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook.* London: Sage Publications.

Smith, A. (2011). Twitter update 2011: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Twitter-Update-2011/Main-Report.aspx

Wyshynski, G. (2010a). NHL teams want bloggers banned from visitors' locker rooms. *Yahoo! Sports.* Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://sports.yahoo.com/nhl/blog/puck_daddy/post/NHL-teams-want-bloggers-banned-from-visitors-lo?urn=nhl-265328

Wyshynski, G. (2010b). Islanders pull popular blogger's credentials to spark controversy. *Yahoo! Sports.* Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://sports.yahoo.com/nhl/blog/puck_daddy/post/Islanders-pull-popular-blogger-s-credentials-to-?urn=nhl-287090

AVERY HOLTON is a David Bruton Fellow researching the intersection of digital and social media networks as a doctoral student in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is also teaches online writing methods. Email: averyholton[at]gmail.com.

MARK CODDINGTON is a master's student researching digital media, information networks, and media sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. He is also a regular writer for the Nieman Journalism Lab.