

# How Facebook Can Leverage Your Professional Sports Objectives

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to discover how professional sports organizations could better engage fans, disseminate marketing messages, and sell tickets and merchandise through Facebook. After researching case studies, trade articles, popular press books, online websites, and blogs, ten categories and 66 criteria were discovered to constitute current Facebook best practices. Using these practices, the top ten NFL and NBA teams with the biggest followings on Facebook were evaluated in two waves, a month apart.

Research showed that best practices were valid. The top-ranked best practice team, the New York Knicks, was also the most engaging team in terms of ‘Likes’ and comments as a percentage of total team fans. In fact, the Knicks had 2.5 times the ‘Likes’ and comments than the average of the top 10 NBA teams.

Currently, both leagues are very similar in their practices. On average, teams are using less than half of current best practices to engage their online Facebook fan community. When it comes to selling tickets and merchandise, both leagues struggle, averaging only 25 percent of best practices. There are many minor changes that teams can make today to increase fan engagement and overall sales. Using team examples and personal suggestions, solutions have been outlined for filling gaps in best practices.

	NFL	NBA	Average
Overall Best Practice Use	42.5%	43.7%	43.1%
Engaging Fans	50.0%	48.8%	49.4%
Selling Tickets & Merchandise	21.2%	29.4%	25.3%

## INTRODUCTION

Facebook has been a growing tool for many businesses to increase sales and brand loyalty. Companies like Dell and Starbucks are exemplars of using Facebook to compliment a marketing plan. During my six month internship with the NFL Kansas City Chiefs, I found that though many teams had Facebook pages, they were not leveraging them to maximize their professional sports objectives: engaging fans, disseminating marketing messages, and selling tickets & merchandise.

The purpose of this research project was to: 1) find best practices for leveraging the aforementioned objectives; 2) evaluate two professional sports leagues (based on best practices); and 3) provide suggestions for improvement.

At the conclusion of the research, findings and suggestions for improvement will be of great value to professional sports teams, and by implementing best practices, they will see meaningful contributions in fan engagement, event attendance, and revenue from tickets and merchandise.

## METHOD

### *Best Practices*

Best practice research focused on three objectives\*: engaging fans, disseminating marketing messages, and selling tickets and merchandise through Facebook. For this research, case studies, trade articles, popular press books, online websites, and blogs were searched. In addition, two workshops were attended on the topics of social media marketing and search engine optimization presented by online marketing expert and author Stephen Woessner.

While there are plenty of online articles about social media best practices, there are few case studies and scholarly articles on the matter. It seems that businesses have only begun experimenting with their Facebook pages to find “the right combination.” The majority of best practices were formed from consistent messages across online articles, the blogosphere, and Woessner’s book, “Increasing Online Sales through Viral Social Networking.” Some social media websites proved to be very useful in the research; the Social Media Examiner and Mashable both feature industry experts who focus specifically on finding best practices and creating guidelines for businesses.

\*Note: The objectives of engaging fans and disseminating marketing messages were combined in best practice research since their criteria largely overlapped.

**Engaging Fans/Disseminating Marketing Messages.** Engagement measures how interested fans are in a team's content. Teams want to create buzz and keep the community talking about the team. ["Social Page Evaluator"] Over half of Facebook's 400 million active users log in daily and spend an average of 55 minutes per day on the site. [Smith, "13 Ways..."] The theory is that by engaging fans, businesses have a greater return on investment the longer they keep fans on their Facebook page. To effectively capture this "market share of engagement," teams need to optimize their content to make their page attractive to visitors. [Porterfield]

Why is Facebook a good medium for disseminating marketing messages? According to an AdWeek article, "On average, a fan base of 1 million translates into at least \$3.6 million in equivalent media over a year." [Morrissey] This additional exposure to the brand beyond traditional media can increase brand loyalty and word of mouth about a team.

These objectives were measured by seven categories featured below: welcome page, general page, page tabs, applications, unique brand experience, contests, and Wall posts.

**Welcome Page** – *The following is a list of Welcome page best practice criteria:*

- Does the team have a Welcome page?
- Are fans directed to the page?
- Is it attention-grabbing?
- Does it give incentive for visitors to become fans?

Welcome or landing tabs serve as the first impression of a team's Facebook page. [Porterfield] The page's main objective is to convert visitors to 'fans' of the page. The more fans a page has, the more attention it draws others to be part of the community. It also means a larger audience to disseminate marketing messages. In some cases, businesses that have adopted a landing page (that encourages visitors to become fans) have doubled their fan conversion rate. [Baer; Smith, "21 Creative..."] Papa John's went to an extreme by offering a free pizza to anyone who became a fan of their Facebook page; they converted 131,000 new fans in one day. [Woessner] Once a visitor becomes a fan, the Facebook user agrees to receive the team's Wall posts in their News Feed. To effectively capture fans, these tabs should be attention grabbing while explaining to users what they get for fanning the page. ["Who's Blogging What"]

**General Page** – *The following is a list of general page best practice criteria:*

- Does the general page have an aesthetically pleasing profile picture?
- Can fans post on the Wall?
- Can fans upload photos?
- Does the team upload at least one photo album a month?
- Does the page use a vanity URL?
- Does the page network with other social media platforms?
- Does the page incorporate video/audio?
- Does the team interact with fans on the Wall?
- Does the team thank fans through praise or promotion?

To effectively engage fans, the general page needs to be attractive and involving. This starts with having an attractive profile picture. Since it will be featured in every Wall post, this image should create a sense of community. [Smith, "How to..."] Fans should be encouraged to share their opinions and life experiences by having the ability to post on the Wall and upload photos. [Weinberg; "Creating Facebook Pages..."] Some teams rationalize turning off Wall functionality for fans by saying it is an effort to "conserve their brand image." A solution to meet both needs is to have an optional-content Wall that allows fans to choose between team posts and fan posts. Additionally, teams can choose which Wall fans see upon entering.

In addition to allowing fans to share, the teams should share their own materials by uploading at least one photo album a month. [Woessner] Photos of events, trips, and team members keep the fans involved even if they cannot be there in person. ["Who's Blogging What"]

The purpose of a vanity URL (ex. [www.facebook.com/packers](http://www.facebook.com/packers)) is to let fans new to Facebook "guess to find you." This also provides an easy-to-remember URL for fans to go directly to a team's page later. ["Who's Blogging What"]

The general Facebook page should act as a hub and an “aggregate [for] social media streams” by incorporating sites like Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Foursquare, or blogs. These “streams” funnel consumers through the team’s network and can be involved in a variety of ways: through wall posts, page tabs, contests, or custom applications. [Weinberg]

Teams should also harness the power of video and audio to engage fans. [Woessner] Many teams already incorporate podcasts, videos, and other media into their team website. Since social media is a gateway for information in a convenient place for fans, teams should post their media on the team Facebook page as well.

One way of engaging fans and creating brand loyalty is by thanking and having conversations with fans. Thanking fans is a great way to show that a team appreciates their continued support. Teams can thank fans for their loyalty by giving them something of value: coupons, tickets, and messages from players. [“4 Easy Ways...”] By actively participating in the conversation, teams will be “increasing the good will for [their] company.” [“Who’s Blogging What?”] This interaction can be achieved by guiding an ongoing discussion on Facebook or by involving fans through media featured on the page.

**Page Tabs** – *The following is a list of page tab best practice criteria:*

- Are the tabs relevant to fans?
- Do the tabs contain up-to-date content?
- Are there any empty or unused tabs?
- Do the tabs broaden social media reach?

Tabs are a way for Facebook fans to navigate through various content-pages. These tabs can serve the purpose of engagement (ex. videos, pictures, and podcasts) or the dissemination of marketing messages (ex. upcoming games, activities, and events). Even the most famous brands, however, make the mistake of having not relevant, up-to-date, or used tabs. [“Who’s Blogging What?”] These “fluff” tabs are a distraction from a team’s marketing messages and should be either used, updated, or removed. Teams that use social media tabs are promoting their Facebook page as the hub for all of their social media streams. [“5 Elements of...”]

**Applications** – *The following is a list of application best practice criteria:*

- Does the team use general applications (Deals, Friend Activity, social media applications)?
- Does the team have custom applications?
- Does the team incorporate a mobile application?
- Are the applications fun?
- Are the applications engaging?
- Do the applications keep fans on the Facebook page (rather than divert them elsewhere)?
- Do the applications incorporate sharing?

General and custom Wall applications like Coupon or Poll offer greater levels of engagement to businesses. Many of the Social Media Examiner’s top Facebook pages use custom apps (ex. games) with entertaining content to engage fans. [Porterfield]

Mobile networking applications are a great way to engage fans on-the-go. In fact, 75% of businesses are currently using mobile networking apps to interact with fans. [Stelzner]

As the objective of the team is to maximize market share of engagement, applications should encourage community interaction and promote the Facebook page as “home base.” Applications that incorporate sharing, amplify the reach of the Facebook page (and marketing messages) through word-of-mouth. [Weinberg] A sharing call-to-action serves as a reminder for fans to ask, “Which of my friends would enjoy this game as well?” [“Facebook Best Practices...”]

**Unique Brand Experience** – *The following is a list of unique brand experience best practice criteria:*

- Does the team give fans exclusive content (behind-the-scenes action, media, rewards)?
- Does the team provide fans with exclusive merchandise deals?
- Does the team seek the opinions of fans on products/services/events?
- Does the team invite fans into the creation process for events/projects/ad campaigns?

The Facebook Page Marketing Guide tells businesses to treat their Facebook page like it is the fans “own personal VIP room,” as if they are “past the velvet rope” while the rest of fans not on Facebook are still waiting in

line. This means providing unique content and deals fans cannot get anywhere else; not from the team site, not from the Twitter account, not from the merchandise store. [“Who’s Blogging What?”] This creates a unique value proposition for the team’s Facebook page that compels visitors and fans to come back. Teams can achieve this unique VIP experience by offering exclusive content (ex. Kobe Bryant warm-up video), exclusive merchandise deals (ex. all Facebook fans get 20% off Draft caps this weekend), and by soliciting the opinion of fans (ex. game day feedback) and involving them in the creative process (ex. events). This customer-centric approach involves getting the opinions of fans on products, services, events, or advertising and incorporating the ideas. [“Creating Facebook Pages...”]

**Contests** – *The following is a list of contest best practice criteria:*

- Does the team host at least one contest (within a seven day period)?
- Is participation for fans simple?
- Is the contest fun?
- Does the contest incorporate sharing?
- Does the contest invite fans to share something personal?
- Does the contest focus on user-created content?
- Does the contest give away one-of-a-kind items or experiences?

According to the Social Media Examiner, “Running a contest on Facebook is a powerful way to generate buzz, increase engagement, boost your fan count, and build your email list.” [Smith, “Facebook Promotions...”] Top ten Facebook pages use simple, fun contests that incorporate a sharing component so the contest spreads virally. To connect on a deeper level with fans, contests should invite fans to share something personal (ex. a short story about their favorite game) and submit user-created content (ex. pictures from a game). These personal experiences can create nostalgic feelings associated with the brand while it allows the team to get to know their audience better. [Porterfield]

Fans will also be more likely to participate in contests if they are offered the chance to win unique experiences or products in exchange for their participation. New Belgium launched a “What’s Your Folly” campaign on Facebook in 2009 where fans submitted short stories for a chance to win a cruiser bicycle every week for five weeks. The 7,000 follies submitted resulted in 10,000 new fans and one million impressions of the page. [Peterson]

**Wall Posts** – *The following is a list of Wall post best practice criteria:*

- Does the team average 2-3 posts per day?
- Does the posting schedule follow a consistent pattern?
- Is the average length of the Wall posts less than 210 characters?
- Does the ratio of conversational to promotional posts fall between 7:1 and 5:1?
- Are the posts relevant to the audience?
- Are the posts diverse?
- Are the posts entertaining?
- Are the posts original (not reposts from sites like Twitter)?
- Do the posts use informal language?
- Do the posts contain video/graphics/audio? (at least 50% of posts)
- Do the posts contain links? (at least 50% of posts)
- Do the posts ask questions to get fans to share their opinions? (at least 50% of posts)
- Do the posts contain videos that average less than 3 minutes?

While it is very important to create a Facebook page that fans want to return to, many businesses do not put in the time and the effort to do so. These businesses know that the majority of fan interactions occur within the News Feed. Jeff Widman, CEO of Brand Glue, affirms this find, “We recently analyzed a bunch of status updates from a client of ours with more than 10 million fans. We found that- on average- for every one comment on the status update via the Wall, 199 came via the newsfeed!” [King]

Effective engagement through Wall posts starts with quantity. While many businesses believe quantity is king, they need to be sure they are not overwhelming fans. The goal of these posts is to incite daily ‘likes’ and comments. [Smith, “How to...”] According to a recent Facebook study, “People who click the Facebook ‘Like’ button are more engaged, active, and connected than the average Facebook user. The average ‘liker’ has 2.4x the amount of friends than that of a typical user.” [“3 Tips...”] The more comments a team has, the more “viral visibility” and free

marketing they will create. Multiple sources cite that the proper range for most businesses is 2-3 posts a day. [King; Woessner; “Social Page Evaluator”] Fewer than two posts a day would be a lost opportunity for businesses while running over three posts a day runs the risk of annoying their audience, which may result in opting-out of a brand’s updates. These posts should follow a posting pattern during high traffic windows when the page is most frequently visited. [Woessner]

Many sources emphasize the need to keep posts short. [Smith, “13 Ways...”] Fans read the News Feed akin to that of a newspaper, so status updates should be, on average, less than 210 characters. [Woessner]

Wall posts should also balance conversational versus promotional content. Conversational posts have the sole purpose of engaging fans, while promotional content involves disseminating marketing messages, product offers, sponsorship involvement, or any call-to-action. Stephen Woessner has found this ratio to be 6:1 (a 5:1-7:1 range is used for research purposes). A business that is promotional-post heavy again runs the risk of annoying fans. [Woessner]

To maximize engagement, Wall posts should be relevant to the audience, diverse, entertaining, and original (ex. not reposts from Twitter). Businesses should be advised that Facebook is not a broadcasting platform for latest blog posts, it is a means to engage with fans. [“Who’s Blogging What”] Many sites recommend having a Twitter tab for this purpose. To get fans to interact, teams should use informal language (“you,” “your”) in their posts. [Smith, “13 Ways...”] This creates an atmosphere for interaction rather than a one-way conversation.

Because posts are read much like newspaper headlines, teams need to incorporate video, graphics, and/or audio into their posts for differentiation. Woessner says, “If you include photos within your updates, they will visually stand out from all the other posts within someone’s News Feed.” To optimize engagement and minimize boredom, video posts should average less than 3 minutes in length. [Woessner] Teams should also embed links in their posts so fans can seek additional information when engaged. These links are best when they lead to other team/league sites instead of out-of-network sites. Finally, effective posts engage fans through asking questions. [“Who’s Blogging What”] Questions are an easy call to action for “engaging people’s egos and provoking viral distribution of your content.” These can be in the form of formal polls (ex. “Which member of the Packers’ draft class are you most excited to see in action?”) or an informal question (ex. “Which dunk was the best?”) [“How to...”] Questions that ask people to share personal experiences or opinions tend to get the most responses. [Schwartz] The combination of these tools can be very compelling for fans; one study found that when videos were paired with a question, “video plays jumped by a whopping factor of 7 to 10,” which resulted in 100 times more Facebook media impressions. [“4 Easy Ways...”]

**Selling Tickets & Merchandise.** Facebook fans represent a large ticket and merchandise opportunity for fans. One study found that Facebook fans spend, on average, \$71.84 more than non-fans over a two-year period. Multiply that number by the average number of Facebook fans for an NFL team (750,000) and it results in \$53,880,000 in additional revenue over non-fans in a two-year period. Additionally, 68 percent of fans are “very likely” to recommend a product to family and friends, versus 28 percent of non-fans. [Schwartz] This objective was measured by three categories featured below: promotional posts, the general site, and merchandise store.

*Promotional Posts – The following is a list of promotional post best practice criteria:*

- Do the promotional posts fall within the conversational to promotional ratio range of 7:1 to 5:1?
- Are the promotional posts pushy?
- Does the team alert fans when new merchandise is available?
- Are the promotional messages posted in the morning Monday through Friday?
- Are the promotional messages customized to the audience?

Promotional Wall posts provide a greater conversion rate for teams than traditional practices. Advertising Age found that while typical click through rates for display ads and email marketing were 0.75% and 1.34%, respectively, while Wall posts had a click-through rate of greater than 6.5%. [“Digital Marketing...”]

As previously mentioned, the conversational to promotional content ratio should fall near 6:1. Having a pushy, “buy now, the world is ending tomorrow” sales strategy will hurt a team’s sales on social media. Instead, messages should be personalized to the audience while stressing the benefits (ex. a steep discount). [Kelly] Teams should, however, alert fans when new merchandise is available; one study shows 35 percent of fans want to be notified of new product availability. [“Who’s Blogging What”] Techipedia affirms this statistic, “People interact with brands online because they want deals. Try to offer some every so often.” [Weinberg] Woessner found that promotional posts are most receptive when delivered in the morning, Monday through Friday, “People tend to make online purchases in the morning while at work before their busy day begins.” [Woessner]

**General Site** – *The following is a list of general site best practice criteria:*

- Does the site utilize check-in deals?
- Does the site offer exclusive discounts or coupons?
- Does the site offer exclusive items?
- Does the site use custom tabs to generate sales?

A unique form of Deals is a location-based ‘check-ins.’ At some stadiums, a fan can check-in to the location (which provides word-of-mouth for the team- “Joe is at Arrowhead Stadium”) and receive 15% off an item at the team store. This provides fans in attendance with incentive to purchase additional products from the team. [Brooks] The Golden State Warriors offered 23 check-in deals tied in with merchandise deals or other special opportunities for home games. On average, they amassed 740 check-ins per game, totaling over 17,000 check-ins. The team has seen incremental growth in sales and Facebook fans. [“How Facebook Deals...”]

Exclusive items, discounts, and coupons fulfill two roles: 1) they give reason to follow the brand and 2) create a sense of urgency for sales (ex. “Today only, get 20% all products at the Team Store Online.”) [Brooks] Coupons are a leading driver of brand interactions in social networks; one study showed that 37 percent of fans cited “wanted coupons or discounts” for the primary purpose for becoming a fan of a business on Facebook. [“Coupons Drive Sales...”] These coupons should be easy-to-use and traceable in order to measure effectiveness. [Woessner]

To call attention to a merchandise store, teams should create a custom tab to generate sales. Though a merchandise store is ideal, many companies already have an e-commerce store they would rather direct their fans to. At the very least, these businesses should offer a graphic link of products to the team store. [Weinberg]

**Merchandise Store** – *The following is a list of merchandise store best practice criteria:*

- Does the site have a tab that is or links to the merchandise store?
- Does the site have a live merchandise store?
- Do the fans have the ability to ‘Like’ products on Facebook?
- Do the fans have the ability to search products on Facebook?
- Do the fans have the ability to share products on Facebook?
- Do the fans have the ability to discuss products on Facebook?
- Do the fans have the ability to purchase products on Facebook?
- Does the site incorporate product reviews?

As mentioned, Facebook presents a great opportunity for tickets and merchandise sales. By having a live, fully integrated e-commerce merchandise store application on Facebook, teams can leverage the power of referrals while offering promotions at a place that is convenient for fans. Top e-commerce businesses like JCPenney and 1-800-Flowers offer the ability to ‘like,’ search, share, discuss, and purchase products on Facebook. [“Facebook Best Practices...”] By ‘liking’ a product on Facebook, a fan allows the product message to be disseminated through their newsfeed to their (on average) 200+ fans. Sharing and discussing products are another way to spread word of mouth about products fans enjoy. In addition, product reviews and ‘likes’ are a sort of referral from friends and other fans of the team. The popularity and good reviews can compel a fan to action. One study showed that “68% of consumers said a positive referral from a ‘friend’ on Facebook would positively influence their purchase decision.” [“Who’s Blogging What”]

**Team Research Methods**

After establishing best practices, two leagues were chosen to evaluate based on the aforementioned criteria. Both the NFL and the NBA were selected because of their top brand positions in American sports. It was determined to see how the best of sports supported the best of Facebook practices. To support this idea of “testing the best,” the top ten most popular teams of each league on Facebook were evaluated as of March 28th. Each team was evaluated twice, once on March 28th and a month later on April 28th, to get

NFL Teams	Likes 3/28	NBA Teams	Likes 3/28
Dallas Cowboys	2,504,121	Los Angeles Lakers	7,348,676
Pittsburg Steelers	2,136,759	Boston Celtics	3,783,219
New England Patriots	1,871,878	Miami Heat	1,982,571
Chicago Bears	1,454,102	Chicago Bulls	1,760,669
Green Bay Packers	1,445,216	Orlando Magic	731,650
New Orleans Saints	1,267,437	Cleveland Cavaliers	656,993
Indianapolis Colts	1,040,421	New York Knicks	573,003
Minnesota Vikings	898,266	San Antonio Spurs	572,999
Philadelphia Eagles	866,088	Denver Nuggets	509,703
New York Giants	760,577	Dallas Mavericks	416,295

a more panoramic view of team practices rather than a single snapshot.

Within a wave, a team’s Facebook page was evaluated on the 66 criteria, which was individually tallied and physically counted in an Excel spreadsheet. Additionally, all of the team’s posts within a seven-day period (consistent for both leagues) were tracked for length, time of post, and a number of other factors. These individual posts were averaged together to get an average post length, posting pattern, and average percentage of graphics and links for each team.

In addition to the criteria evaluation, the number of tabs, contests, as well as the ‘likes’ and comments of each of team’s posts (over a seven day period) were tracked. This last statistic allowed for the calculation of the average ‘likes’ and comments of each team as a percentage of total fans. Since there is nearly a seven million discrepancy in fans from the Lakers to the Mavericks, this served as an appropriate measure for overall fan engagement.

Upon completion of a wave, each team’s score would be added up within the 10 grouped categories. To achieve this ‘panoramic view’ of the teams, each team’s two wave scores over the 10 categories would be averaged to create a composite score. This composite score was used in the results section to compare and contrast the best practices of the leagues. After both leagues were evaluated on each individual criterion, suggestions for improvement came from personal ideas and examples from best-practice teams.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview

Currently, teams are able to engage their fans; they are doing just enough to keep fans interested in their Facebook activities. By implementing a series of minor adjustments, teams can adopt additional best practices and increase fan engagement.

	NFL	NBA	Average
Overall Best Practice Use	42.5%	43.7%	43.1%
Engaging Fans	50.0%	48.8%	49.4%
Selling Tickets & Merchandise	21.2%	29.4%	25.3%

On the tickets and merchandise side, teams need serious help. They are either unaware of how to use Facebook for e-commerce or are wary of investing resources for a live merchandise store. There are a number of changes teams can make today to increase sales.

### Engaging Fans/Disseminating Marketing Messages (DMM)

Both leagues showed flashes of best practices in many categories. The top five best practice teams were the Knicks, Cowboys, Eagles, Colts, and Mavericks. The top best practice team, the New York Knicks, also was the most engaging team on Facebook, having 2.5 times the ‘likes’ and comments of the average NBA team.

By the overall numbers, the NFL and NBA look equal in their fan engagement practices. However, upon a more in-depth analysis, one would find that these teams engage differently; the NFL is better at contests and Welcome pages, while NBA teams have better general pages and media. To increase fan engagement and the reach of marketing messages, all teams need to improve their unique brand experience while making small adjustments in a number of other categories.

Team	Overall Out of 65	Engaging Fans Out of 48	Tickets & Merch. Out of 17	Team	Engaging Fans Out of 48	Team	Engaging Fans Out of 17
Dallas Cowboys	41.0	33.0	8.0	New York Knicks	35.0	Miami Heat	11.5
New York Knicks	40.0	35.0	5.0	Dallas Cowboys	33.0	Boston Celtics	10.0
Dallas Mavericks	36.5	29.0	7.5	Philadelphia Eagles	29.5	Dallas Cowboys	8.0
Philadelphia Eagles	33.5	29.5	4.0	Indianapolis Colts	29.5	Dallas Mavericks	7.5
Indianapolis Colts	33.0	29.5	3.5	Dallas Mavericks	29.0	Orlando Magic	6.0
Boston Celtics	32.0	22.0	10.0	New England Patriots	27.0	New York Knicks	5.0
Miami Heat	31.5	20.0	11.5	Denver Nuggets	27.0	New Orleans Saints	5.0
New England Patriots	29.5	27.0	2.5	New York Giants	22.5	Cleveland Cavaliers	4.5
Denver Nuggets	29.0	27.0	2.0	Chicago Bulls	22.5	Philadelphia Eagles	4.0
Orlando Magic	27.0	21.0	6.0	San Antonio Spurs	22.5	Indianapolis Colts	3.5
New Orleans Saints	25.5	20.5	5.0	Boston Celtics	22.0	Pittsburg Steelers	3.5
New York Giants	25.5	22.5	3.0	Chicago Bears	22.0	New York Giants	3.0
Chicago Bears	24.0	22.0	2.0	Orlando Magic	21.0	New England Patriots	2.5
Chicago Bulls	24.0	22.5	1.5	Minnesota Vikings	21.0	Minnesota Vikings	2.5
Minnesota Vikings	23.5	21.0	2.5	New Orleans Saints	20.5	Denver Nuggets	2.0
San Antonio Spurs	23.0	22.5	0.5	Miami Heat	20.0	Chicago Bears	2.0
Cleveland Cavaliers	22.0	17.5	4.5	Green Bay Packers	20.0	Green Bay Packers	2.0
Green Bay Packers	22.0	20.0	2.0	Cleveland Cavaliers	17.5	Chicago Bulls	1.5

Los Angeles Lakers	19.0	17.5	1.5
Pittsburg Steelers	18.5	15.0	3.5

Los Angeles Lakers	17.5
Pittsburg Steelers	15.0

Los Angeles Lakers	1.5
San Antonio Spurs	0.5

**Welcome Page.** About half of all teams surveyed had a welcome page. Those who had welcome pages had little trouble making it visually appealing to fans. Where teams are falling short is giving incentives for visitors to become fans. Teams can use large incentives to build big fan communities quickly: the Knicks offer playoff tickets presale access and a chance to win a \$50 gift card to the team store for ‘liking’ the Knicks. Not all incentives have to be as extreme as giving 131,000 pizzas away, however; these incentives can be simple and still attract fans over time. The Packers tell fans to ‘like’ the page to receive regular updates from the team. The big idea is that teams need a call-to-action for visitors.

On a league level, when an NFL team has a Welcome page, they do it well. NFL teams know to direct the fan to the Welcome page before the Wall. On the NBA side, however, nearly half of fans are not directed to the page. The new visitor is instead taken directly to the Wall. Because of this, many potential fans do not convert because they dive straight into the team’s posts.

To expand the online community of NFL and NBA fans, each league should develop Welcome page templates for teams. More fans can lead to better overall engagement in each respected sport and individual community.

**General Page.** Overall, most teams know how to create an appealing profile picture, use a vanity URL, and incorporate video or audio in their site. Many teams lack in the praise, social networking, and fan interaction categories. Both fan interaction and praise deepens the relationship between brand and fan, while connecting with other social media sites provides opportunities for further engagement. The Patriots thanked their one million Facebook fans by uploading a new profile that said, “thanks a million!” Teams can better interact with fans by answering their Wall questions and participating in Wall and discussion board conversations.

When it comes to engaging fans through user-posts and photos, the NBA trumps the NFL. This is likely the result of two factors: 1) The NFL is trying to limit criticism of their brand during the lockout (and thus taking away fan posting abilities), and 2) The NBA uses more photo-submission contests than the NFL. The NBA has a favorable advantage over the NFL in media as well; the NFL uploads fewer photo albums and incorporates less video and audio than the NBA. These media are essential to making a brand come alive over the web. The NFL should aim to become less text-oriented and more graphically and aurally stimulating.

**Page Tabs.** The NFL and NBA both have problems in the tabs category. The NBA has far too many stale tabs while the NFL has too many unused tabs. These tabs serve as a distraction from other important messages a team is trying to send through their Facebook page. To solve this problem, teams should create a schedule for updating,

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Welcome Page Rank</b>	<b>41.3%</b>	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>36.3%</b>
Did they have one?	45.0%	45.0%	45.0%
Directed to page?	45.0%	25.0%	35.0%
Is it attention grabbing?	45.0%	40.0%	42.5%
Does it give incentive for visitors to become fans?	30.0%	15.0%	22.5%

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>General Page Rank</b>	<b>49.4%</b>	<b>61.1%</b>	<b>55.3%</b>
Does it have an aesthetically pleasing profile picture?	90.0%	75.0%	82.5%
Can fans post on the Wall?	25.0%	45.0%	35.0%
Can fans upload photos?	30.0%	80.0%	55.0%
Does the team upload at least one photo album a month?	1.10	2.05	1.58
Does the page use a vanity URL?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Does the page network with other social media platforms?	45.0%	40.0%	42.5%
Does the page incorporate video or audio?	65.0%	100.0%	82.5%
Does the team interact with fans on the Wall?	20.0%	15.0%	17.5%
Does the team thank fans through praise or promotion?	35.0%	35.0%	35.0%

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Page Tabs Rank</b>	<b>67.5%</b>	<b>51.3%</b>	<b>59.4%</b>
Number of Tabs	7.1	10.3	8.7
Are the tabs relevant to fans?	100.0%	85.0%	92.5%
Do the tabs contain up-to-date content?	85.0%	60.0%	72.5%
Are there any empty or unused tabs?	65.0%	20.0%	42.5%
Do the tabs broaden social media reach?	20.0%	40.0%	30.0%

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Applications Rank</b>	<b>35.0%</b>	<b>55.7%</b>	<b>45.4%</b>
Does the team use general applications (Deals, social media apps, Friend Activity?)	30.0%	55.0%	42.5%
Does the team have custom applications?	40.0%	80.0%	60.0%
Does the team incorporate a mobile application?	10.0%	15.0%	12.5%
Are the applications fun?	30.0%	60.0%	45.0%
Are the applications engaging?	45.0%	70.0%	57.5%
Do the applications keep fans on the Facebook page (rather than divert them elsewhere)?	45.0%	40.0%	42.5%
Do the applications incorporate sharing?	45.0%	70.0%	57.5%



deleting, or adding tabs twice a month. Also, teams should make reminders to take down a tab promotion upon the conclusion of the promotional period.

Additionally, very infrequently does either league use tabs to broaden their social media reach. Out of the twenty teams, seven teams had a Twitter tab, two had a Flickr tab, and one had a YouTube or Foursquare tab. Nearly every NBA and NFL team has one (if not many) Twitter accounts. The installation of other social media tabs like Twitter, Foursquare, and YouTube is a simple process that all teams should make to increase engagement.

**Applications.** In general, teams do not use applications often enough to engage fans. Free, general applications like those for social media are not being taken advantage of. Furthermore, even though many teams have mobile applications including text-updates for games, few are advertising them to their 200,000+ fans on Facebook. Once again, this is a missed opportunity to extend the reach of the brand.

The NBA has better overall application practices than the NFL, mostly due to their willingness to develop custom applications that are fun, engaging, and share-worthy. The Knicks allow fans to create their own personal avatar on their Facebook page. These applications can come in the form of games, team cam/radio channels, or special polls and friend gifts. NFL teams should create more custom applications to keep fans coming back to their page rather than relying on the Wall for information. This way, the teams can expose fans to more marketing and merchandise messages.

**Unique Brand Experience.** All teams can improve on their unique brand experience. While some teams do offer exclusive content such as live video, behind-the-scenes action, and contests, few offer exclusive merchandise deals and even fewer seek the opinions of fans or invite them into the creative process. For example, the Giants offer behind-the-scenes photos of the NFL Draft. As teams become more customer-oriented, more will look to social media for fan feedback and input on commercials, upcoming events, and initiatives as well.

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Unique Brand Experience Rank</b>	<b>21.3%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>	<b>18.8%</b>
Does the team give fans exclusive content (behind-the-scenes)?	55.0%	30.0%	42.5%
Does the team provide fans with exclusive merchandise deals?	15.0%	25.0%	20.0%
Does the team seek the opinions of fans on products or events?	5.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Does the team invite fans into the creation process for events, projects, or ad campaigns?	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%

Right now, teams can invite fans to games and events through Facebook. One way to seek get fan feedback about a game or event is to send a message to all those who confirmed their attendance on Facebook. This way, the customer service department catches fans at a time and place that is convenient for them, rather than when they are running out the stadium gates.

**Contests.** In the NFL, most teams ran one or two contests over the research period. In the NBA, however, this was reversed: few teams ran many contests. The Mavericks, for example, ran five contests over the two research periods, which account for a third of all researched NBA team contests. Teams should incorporate contests into their posting schedule once a week. These contests do not have to be complex or include much planning to get fan participation: the Knicks got 15,033 likes and 1,263 comments by offering a free pair of playoff tickets to one lucky fan who ‘liked’ the post.

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Contests Rank</b>	<b>51.4%</b>	<b>38.6%</b>	<b>45.0%</b>
Does the team host at least one contest? (Number of contests)	0.90	0.75	0.83
Is participation for fans simple?	60.0%	35.0%	47.5%
Is the contest fun?	40.0%	35.0%	37.5%
Does it incorporate sharing?	55.0%	40.0%	47.5%
Does it invite fans to share something personal?	45.0%	35.0%	40.0%
Does it focus on user-created content?	30.0%	40.0%	35.0%
Does it give away one-of-a-kind items or experiences?	65.0%	40.0%	52.5%

These small, exclusive contests provide value to fans that they cannot get from any other place, giving them more reason to ‘Like’ the page and receive future marketing messages.

Of those teams who have contests, very few have problems making participation simple, fun, and share-worthy. Most teams understand the need to give away one-of-a-kind items and experiences. The area in which teams can improve is creating contests that focus on user-created content like personal stories and photos. The sharing of these experiences creates nostalgia while deepening the relationship between fan and team.

**Wall Posts.** Overall, NFL and NBA teams are very similar in their Wall posts. Teams do not have trouble averaging fewer than 210 characters per post, having relevant or original content, or using graphics, links, and informal language. Teams do struggle, however, in the department of asking questions and retaining a 6:1 conversational to promotional ratio. Asking questions via Wall posts is one of the easiest ways to engage fans. When crafting each post, teams should consider what questions they can ask to strike the interest of fans and compel them to comment. Teams should also track (and limit) the frequency of their promotional posts. Too many teams posted one call-to-action after another, which seemed to really annoy fans.

While it may seem that the NBA teams post too frequently, it is likely a cause of the playoff games. Only two teams seemed to abuse their posting privileges: the Dallas Cowboys and the Dallas Mavericks. In one week, the Dallas Mavericks averaged over 15 posts per day, leading to a grand total of 106 posts. During this span, the Mavericks average ‘likes’ and comments per post were 86% and 75% lower than other NBA teams. Some people may argue that while each posts receive fewer likes, the cumulative ‘likes’ of the 100 posts exceed those of other teams. This statement is false. In fact, the average team had five times more ‘likes’ than the Mavericks during this period. Currently, the Mavericks and Cowboys are leveraging the power of disengagement. Not only are fans being turned off, but the team is losing money by investing so much time into inefficient posting methods.

When looking at ‘Likes’ and comments, the New York Knicks were the most engaging NBA team, having 2.5 times the ‘likes’ and comments of the average NBA team. They are also the leader in engagement best practices, meaning it is likely that my research is valid.

It is understandable to see the NBA has better fan engagement in the playoffs than the NFL in the off-season. For this same reason, the NBA posts are generally not as diverse or entertaining since many teams are giving game updates. Still, teams like the Wizards post each game’s Dance Cam and Kiss Cam on the Wall for fans. On that note, it is important to point out that some teams are still using Facebook for real-time game updates. In reality, this is what Twitter is built for. Instead, teams should refer fans to their Twitter page for following the action. Furthermore, Twitter posts should not be posted to Facebook as well. Since each social stream does not offer unique content, fans are compelled to follow one or the other, not both.

Finally, all teams should implement a consistent posting pattern and advertise it to fans. Currently, many teams are inconsistent in their posting times. When a consistent posting pattern is scheduled, a team can better control traffic to their Facebook page. The Dallas Cowboys post their Deal of the Day at 10am each morning. Once fans begin to recognize this schedule, they start to ask, “What are the Cowboys offering this morning?”

*Selling Tickets & Merchandise*

There is much money to be made on conversational commerce. As previously mentioned, an average team can create millions of dollars in additional revenue by leveraging promotional opportunities efficiently on Facebook. Statistics show that fans are most receptive to promotions from teams on Facebook and that the click-through rate is better than email marketing or display advertisements.

The top five best practice teams in selling tickets and merchandise are the Heat, Celtics, Cowboys, Mavericks, Magic. Unfortunately, the other teams have horrendous current practices. Few teams allow fans to view or buy tickets on Facebook. Fewer teams allow fans to view or buy products on Facebook. All teams need to improve their promotional posts, general site, and merchandise stores to take advantage of this great sales opportunity.

Engaging Fans/DMM Criteria	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Posts Rank</b>	<b>61.9%</b>	<b>57.3%</b>	<b>59.6%</b>
Does the team average 2-3 posts per day? (Average posts per day)	2.53	4.12	3.33
Does the posting schedule follow a consistent pattern?	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%
Is the average length of the Wall posts less than 210 characters?	155	166	160
Does the ratio of conversational to promotional posts fall between 7:1 and 5:1?	4.16	3.25	3.70
‘Likes’ per post as a % of total fans	0.0536%	0.1383%	0.096%
Comments per post as a % of total fans	0.0106%	0.0371%	0.024%
Are posts: Relevant to the audience?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Are posts: Diverse?	95.0%	65.0%	80.0%
Are posts: Entertaining?	80.0%	45.0%	62.5%
Are posts: Original? (not reposts from other sites)	95.0%	80.0%	87.5%
Do the posts: Use informal language?	90.0%	80.0%	85.0%
What % of posts contain video, graphics, or audio? (At least 50%)	71.8%	63.8%	67.8%
What % of posts contain links? (At least 50%)	67.7%	67.9%	67.8%
What % of posts ask questions to get fans to share their opinions? (At least 50%)	16.4%	13.0%	14.7%
Do the posts: Contain videos that average less than 3 minutes?	25.0%	45.0%	35.0%

Selling Tickets & Merchandise Rank	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Promotional Posts Rank</b>	<b>42.0%</b>	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>36.0%</b>
Follow the conversational to promotional ratio of 7:1 to 5:1?	4.16:1	3.25:1	3.70:1
Are the promotional posts pushy?	85.0%	75.0%	80.0%
Does the team alert fans when new merchandise is available?	25.0%	30.0%	27.5%
Are the promotional messages posted in the morning M-F?	45.0%	10.0%	27.5%
Are the promotional messages customized to the audience?	45.0%	30.0%	37.5%

**Promotional Posts.** Teams do not have effective promotional posts. Previously, the need for these teams to better manage their promotional post quantity was discussed. Both leagues need to start doing more ‘Item of the Week’ promotions where they sell discounted inventory or offer new merchandise to fans. Currently, the Saints, Cowboys, and Mavericks are the only teams who partake in such a promotion.

A few teams have pushy sales strategies with little customization to fans. The Mavericks and Heat repeatedly post the same promotion urging fans to “buy now.” This traditional selling strategy goes against the relationship teams are trying to build with fans. Also, many posts assume all fans have the same needs, thus missing out on other segment opportunities.

Another common problem is the timing of promotional posts. Currently, many NFL and NBA teams are sending out promotional posts anytime, throughout the day. This is an inconvenient time for fans. Teams should post in the morning since that is when fans are most likely to make purchasing decisions.

**General Site.** Both leagues also lack in general site tickets and merchandise best practices. Out of the twenty teams surveyed, only four NBA teams and one NFL team currently uses check-ins. Teams should take advantage of these location-based deals by partaking in a season-long campaign like the Warriors did. This will grow awareness of check-in deals for the team while drawing in additional sales and fans following the team on social media. Check-ins can be incorporated into fun contests as well: the Mavericks challenged fans to take a picture with the team mascot and cheerleaders to win a signed team ball.

Selling Tickets & Merchandise Rank	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>General Site Rank</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>
Does the site utilize check-in deals?	10.0%	20.0%	15.0%
Does the site offer exclusive discounts or coupons?	10.0%	5.0%	7.5%
Does the site offer exclusive items?	5.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Does the site use custom tabs to generate sales?	25.0%	55.0%	40.0%

Other areas of improvement for both leagues are offering exclusive discounts, coupons, and items. These can be used to: 1) Thank fans, 2) Bring in new fans (Welcome page), 3) Introduce/draw attention to a new product, and 4) Clear out inventory of an older product. In the end, these exclusive offers add value to a team’s Facebook page and provide incentive for 200,000+ fans to return for more offers.

At the very least, teams should develop a custom tab for their Team Store. Currently, their Facebook pages give the impression that they do not have merchandise stores. At the most basic level, this should be a custom tab with a graphic image (as a link) of some of the merchandise to be found within the store. Teams should have a call-to-action on the tab that instructs visitors to click on the image. A team can also use multiple images to capitalize on different segments (ex. women’s apparel, draft gear, office supplies).

**Merchandise Store.** When it comes to live merchandise stores, the NBA outshines the NFL. The Miami Heat and Dallas Mavericks are prime examples of what a Facebook merchandise store should have the capabilities to do (Mavericks, Heat). They not only allow fans to ‘like,’ discuss, search and share products right on Facebook, but they allow fans to buy them as well. Facebook has great potential for impulse purchases. First of all, products are advertised in a prominent place convenient for fans, a place they have bought into by becoming a fan. This promotion likely will be a time-sensitive offer that takes a 25-50% discount from the normal product price. Then, other fans share their passion for the team by either ‘liking’ the post or the product, which creates popularity and buzz around the item. When a friend buys a product and is asked to post his purchase on his Facebook Wall or to share it with another friend, the team is no longer the “big business out for a dollar.” Instead, the recommendation from a friend builds product credibility since it is coming from a trustworthy source. Thus, when all of these factors are combined, and a fan is given the option to buy the product securely right on Facebook, the perfect storm is created for an impulse buy.

Selling Tickets & Merchandise Rank	NFL	NBA	Average
<b>Merchandise Store Rank</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>33.8%</b>	<b>23.1%</b>
Does the site have a tab that is or links to the merchandise store?	40.0%	60.0%	50.0%
Does the site have a live merchandise store?	0.0%	30.0%	15.0%
Can fans ‘Like’ the products on Facebook?	25.0%	40.0%	32.5%
Can fans search products on Facebook?	5.0%	30.0%	17.5%
Can fans share products on Facebook?	15.0%	60.0%	37.5%
Can fans discuss products on Facebook?	15.0%	10.0%	12.5%
Can fans purchase products on Facebook?	0.0%	20.0%	10.0%
Does the site incorporate product reviews?	0.0%	20.0%	10.0%

Teams will not be able to make many strides in these categories until they develop live merchandise stores. Teams should look to experienced application developers to help create these stores. Milyoni is the developer for the Miami Heat, the Boston Celtics, and the NBA Team Store, three of the best merchandise stores currently available in professional sports.

**LIMITATIONS**

Originally, there was a fourth objective of creating sponsorship opportunities with the objectives of increasing awareness and sales. Unfortunately, very few teams currently use sponsors on Facebook. Based on this information, I determined there was not currently sufficient information to define best practices for sponsorship use on Facebook. Future sponsorship involvement in Facebook will provide additional opportunities for research.

Additionally, this study was not performed while both teams were in season. Therefore, fan engagement from the NBA to the NFL cannot be accurately gauged. The NBA was surveyed during the post-season playoffs, while the NFL was nearing the NFL Draft.

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