

Managing “social shaming” to enhance professional sports clubs’ reputation toward disabled supporters

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Aim of abstract

Social networking sites have changed the way primary stakeholders, mainly sports fans, engage, communicate and interact with all types of sport organisations and individual athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015; Stavros, Meng, Westberg & Farrelly, 2014). An emerging management challenge exists as sport organisations need to become better aware of the potential (negative) impacts of social media activity by fans which are critical of the organisation or the services it provides fans, which can lead to new ways of doing business. Thus, the aim of this presentation is to analyse the impact of “social shaming” on the implementation of accessibility policies for disabled supporters at a Premier League football club.

Practice description

In the context of this study, it can be argued that social media has helped to bring and amplify the collective voice of disabled fans in English football. As such, social media can be a valuable medium to communicate social responsibility as part of their CSR commitments. Thus, the effective use of social media can build and enhance an organisation’s reputational capital. Unfortunately, the converse is also true; failure to effectively manage social media can turn organisation-customer issues into a crisis. Social shaming is defined as “when a customer shames a business who provided poor service” (Zuckerberg, 2013). This presentation discusses the importance of managing customer issues off-line in order to minimise damages to online reputation.

Context description, actors involved

In October 2014, Martin Emery, a lifelong supporter of the club went to take his three sons to a home game. One of his son’s experiences disability and as such was required to sit in a specific section within the stadium, away from his brothers. As his brothers were under 18 they had to sit with a parent, leaving Emery unable to be in two places at once. Upon contacting the club, Emery was not provided with a solution and accused the club of discrimination against disabled people. As a result, Emery, established a twitter account, @UtdDiscriminate and set up a blog to promote the impasse linked by the hashtag #BrothersUtd. His campaign was picked up by Level Playing Field and the Centre for Accessibility in Football in Europe (CAFE), the British and European disabled fans advocacy

groups. From an analysis of a series of tweets and the original documents over the 12-month period, Emery carefully used official responses from the club’s officials to intensify the issues, indicating correctly that the practices were in breach of the 2010 Equality Act. As the campaign progress it attracted wider interest, not just on line but in the traditional local and eventually national press. Emery was invited to speak to senior club officials off-line.

Following the prolonged exchange, the club has improved their disabled seating provision to ensure that families can sit together. An accessible family seating area has been approved and currently provide for Emery’s, and other’s families. From 2017 the club has pledged to increase the number of spaces for wheelchair users. Furthermore, the club has gone on to support Level Playing Field’s 2016 annual ‘Week of Action’ campaign to highlight and promote disabled fans in football by financially supporting the purchase of the banners that will be placed up around English football stadia. Emery is now campaigning for the provision of adult changing facilities for disabled fans and their families.

Implications and learning

As customers feel empowered to exercise their rights and voice concerns via social media, sport organizations must be prepared to respond in an appropriate way. The development of the physical infrastructure at the club’s stadium and its policies provides stark evidence of the wide impact that “social shaming” can have on a professional sport organisation. As the matters gained greater traction online and in larger press outlets, Emery was put in touch with more senior club management, where the issues were not only resolved but actions were taken to further reinforce the club’s CSR commitments to inclusion and access for all supporters.

By taking the discussions off-line and agreeing to the suggestions of a concerned and motivated customer, the club managed its reputation for leadership in the area of disability access provision (Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Grady, 2016). Questions remain whether the online reputation of the organisation is maintained and possibly its CSR credentials are even bolstered by their ultimate actions. This presentation will further highlight the implications to all types of sporting organisations, not just those involved in professional sport, in managing their online reputation.

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