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The importance of viral marketing in managing communication in sport

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Abstract:

Communication management in sports organizations requires not only the use of formal tools, such as an official website, fan page or official TV channel. Effective communication should also be based on informal methods, in which the main role is played by interactions between the sports organization and its stakeholders.

One such form is viral marketing, which involves sharing files with humorous, social or image content on social networks, messengers, blogs and e-mail. In the case of such forms, due to the wide range and speed of spreading opinions, especially negative ones, about the company, its services or products, it becomes necessary to control the emerging opinions. Management of information with a viral potential allows you to reach stakeholders in an informal way, influencing the building of a positive image, response in crisis situations or creating communities.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the degree of viral marketing use in sports clubs. The research was conducted in October 2021 on different social media. However, due to the extensive scope of the research, this paper focuses on the social network Facebook. The research is concerned with determining the use of viral marketing potential in information management and identifying the characteristics of this form of influencing stakeholders. Due to the limited volume of the article, the main subject of the study is the Polish clubs of the highest level of competition against the background of examples from abroad.

The main hypothesis of this article assumes that Polish clubs do not fully use the viral potential and communication activities are based on official messages. Communication management is based on peer benchmarking and replication of what others are doing. It is also assumed that departments responsible for communication in sports clubs do not fully use foreign models.

Keywords:

Internet marketing, sport marketing, viral potential, social media.

Introduction:

Marketing in sport is based on similar principles to other forms of products and services. This results in some similarities in the field of marketing management, including communication management. The specificity of marketing in sport relates to the greater emphasis on several stakeholder groups (fans, local government units, sponsors) whose objectives may differ. Therefore, marketing management in sport requires finding consensus among these groups. A special role in this is played by marketing communication, which should take care of each target group and adapt to the modern requirements of the information society.

Marketing in its present form is no longer just a simple idea that people of previous eras followed, relying only on sales, making money and sometimes good advertising. Today's world and consumer is more and more demanding, and this in turn translates into expansions and new poogeam in marketing matters, this is why a number of types of marketing have been created in order to classify given groups of buyers, and these types are such as: ambient marketing, content marketing, remarketing, affiliate marketing, digital marketing, internet marketing, mobile marketing, narrative marketing, guerrilla marketing, sneaker marketing, political marketing, sensory marketing, sports marketing, whisper marketing, multi-level marketing, viral marketing, scent marketing, reverse marketing, shopper marketing, social media marketing, search engine marketing (Waniowski at al. 2011). All of these forms are also found in marketing in sports.

Since the beginning of the Internet, forms of online marketing have evolved significantly, changing from simple flyers, to graphic style, to multimedia forms. Over time, graphic advertising and flyers have become less important, and this has led to the emergence and growth of areas such as content marketing, viral marketing, and Inbound marketing. The biggest benefit of the rise of online advertising was the ability to instantly communicate product information regardless of geographic or temporal location. The Internet caused many changes in the strategies of the companies concerned, as they used other forms of advertising. Internet marketing also had its beginnings as the first online investment. Advertising was able to adapt to the content of websites, such as Google, Yahoo, where these displayed advertising alongside search results (Kaznowski 2007).

Viral marketing is a particular form of marketoiing because it is difficult to control and its media appeal is very high. This attractiveness causes the desire for its uncontrolled spread in the Internet space, which can negatively affect the image of the club, athlete, coaching staff and other entities related to sport.

Viral marketing (VM) is currently very important in a marketing policy (Akpinar & Berger, 2017). Rayport (1996) was one of the first to addressviral marketing in his article, "The Virus of Marketing." According to Cruz and Fill (2008), the term "viral marketing" was introduced by Jurvetson and Draper in 1997 and defined as "network-supported word of mouth." Hotmail, which used e-mail as a distribution medium, was one of the pioneers in VM (Jurvetson, 2000). Over the course of time, the possible communication channels of VM have expanded. Today, social networks rather than e-mail are used to distribute content. The most popular social networks are currently Facebook and YouTube, followed by the networks WeChat and QQ, which are widespread in Asia. In 2019, 2.94 billion people are expected to use social networks (eMarketer, 2019). With a population of about 7.7 billion people on Earth, this means that more than one in three people on Earth actively uses social networks. These facts illustrate the enormous importance of VM today. For example, after analyzing the US in-depth, these facts become even more impressive.

"Viral marketing" is a name applied to a group of family resemblant marketing strategies, some of them quite old, though the term itself dates from the height of the Internet bubble economy. According it is amounts to little more than "network-enhanced word-of-mouth". Word of mouth is one of the oldest and most effective of all branding and marketing strategies.

"Viral marketing" in the Internet economy was that it turned every user into "an involuntary salesperson" (Moore 2003).

Also in sports, viral marketing is most often associated with the sharing of files with humorous content on social networking sites, messengers, blogs, e-mail. In the case of such forms, due to the wide range and rapid spread of opinions, especially negative ones, about the company, its services or products, it becomes necessary to control the emerging opinions. This is the responsibility of the company's PR department. Thanks to this, the organization has the possibility to obtain important information about its offer and is able to react very quickly to unfavorable comments that pose a threat to the brand image. In addition to the dissemination of messages through various communication channels, there are other forms of network activity that stimulate viral marketing: the "send or recommend to a friend" mechanism; providing free applications; offering interesting games; offering interactive gadgets; providing attractive multimedia content. The "virus spreader" can encourage network users to spread it by organizing contests, in which prizes are awarded for the highest number of recommendations made. The greatest advantage of using viral marketing for promotional activities is the completely different nature of communication from that in the traditional media. The recipient of the message participates in the process of its spreading. The user voluntarily decides to get acquainted with the message, gets involved and spends his time. These are the conditions for positive shaping of the company's image. There are also limitations connected with the application of this type of marketing. Once the message is circulated it is very difficult to withdraw it and its content cannot be modified. In addition, it is easy to lose control over the information made available and then the marketing effects are not easy to predict (Gębarowski 2007).

Viral advertising on the Internet takes different forms, but its purpose, which is the message must be very simple so that it reaches as many people as possible, and give them the opportunity to share our content. Transmission and sharing can be done by, for example.

- posting it on various sites, such as Facebook,
- publishing it on the advertiser's website,
- publishing it on blogs.

However, when it comes to the most popular forms, the following can be mentioned:

- videos,
- animations,
- online and mobile games,
- photographs,
- audio recordings,
- text message e.g. quote, joke, satire.

Creating such a form of information requires good knowledge of the environment and the needs of the target group, in addition to the factors that need to be taken into account to make the message readily available. The most effective message, which is often passed on is to create a small game or video, in which the product is presented at the beginning, end or is one of the elements of a given message or woven in as a kind of mystery that must be solved, such interest will attract customers and go further through them (Jonah 2013). The creation of such an advertisement is commonly called viral, in its creation the following elements can be distinguished:

- knowing and distinguishing the target group,
- preparation of a message addressed to the group,
- selection of channels for spreading the advertisement,
- creating list of recipients,
- sending the viral to them,
- encouraging recipients to share its content,

- monitoring the effects.

Viral advertising allows advertisers to avoid a very important problem, namely blocking banners by websites, and even get a more reliable message and most importantly reach the target groups. On the other hand, it is worth considering what the recipients get, and what they get is precisely the form of message that is supposed to amuse them or temporarily relieve them from their daily hardships (Masiarz 2016).

In sports, social media and viral marketing are not only used by clubs, but also by athletes (Hudimova et al., 2021). Social media presence allows athletes to engage with fans (Frederick et al., 2012) and gives them a new way to manage their brand, sell themselves to potential sponsors, and gain support (Lebel & Danylchuk 2012; GeurinEagleman & Burch, 2016; Hull, 2014). In addition to these

types of involvement of athletes in social media, researchers have identified the following categories of activities

in social networks (Hambrick et al., 2010):

- 1) interactivity,
- 2) diversion,
- 3) information sharing,
- 4) content,
- 5) fans),
- 6) advertising.

A large role in communication management is played by the way of content tagging, use of links, so called hashtags, which allow to reach more and more users of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, youtube and others) (Celuch 2021).

The recipient of traditional media was a user, but not a participant. The fundamental difference of social media lies in the experience that is realized through conversation. In the ecosystem, instead of matter, information circulates, but it is not a product of the communication process, but only its beginning. The essence of communication is a conversation, discussion, which "happens" on the basis of information that is given once. Thus, the central element of communication so understood is no longer information, but the interaction of ecosystem participants (Gajek 2016).

Communication management system in sport means conducting a dialogue with stakeholders - participants. This dialogue should be conducted and coordinated by the marketing department in constant contact with every employee of the club, athletes, members of the training staff. For this purpose properly constructed contracts and employment agreements are used, which limit the activity of people who can negatively affect the image of the club, also through viral marketing.

The club or sportsman should be aware of the fact that viral marketing can negatively influence the opinion of the stakeholders. The difficulty of stopping its negative effects and using it properly is one of the main problems in the modern world of communication and marketing.

Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions. Off the Internet, viral marketing has been referred to as "word-of-mouth," "creating a buzz," "leveraging the media," "network marketing."

In a sports organization's communication with the public, therefore, it is important to harness the viral potential of information to build informal connections with the audience and to adapt to the realities of today's information world. This potential allows positive information to reach the audience not in a formal way, but to be distinguished by humor, distance from each other, sensitivity to social or world problems.

Material & methods:

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the degree of viral marketing use in sports clubs. In addition, it is intended to broaden the knowledge on the skillful use of viral marketing by other sports-related entities in order to influence the positive perception of the entities by contemporary Internet content audiences.

The article uses the method of observing the degree of activity of the recipients of promotional activities in the Internet space. Particular attention was paid to mass media, because they, almost by definition, should be responsible for a message that is close, fast and interesting, adjusted to both the target audience and the contemporary information world. As part of the observation, the activity of Polish top football clubs was examined. It concerned Facebook, as this medium is the main center of information spreading in social media. Other social media such as Twitter, Youtube, Diskord or Instagram are more often places for commenting on specific events. While these media can be a venue for further information dissemination, their nature is usually secondary. The exception is particularly controversial statements made by athletes, but even so, ultimately the flow of information leads to Facebook.

For research purposes, the activity of 18 football teams was analyzed. The collection of information on social media activity was for October 2021. The choice of the time range is not important here, because the conduct of pages on social networks depending on the phase of the season does not change significantly. Only the topics of individual posts change seasonally. The activity of individual football clubs was evaluated in terms of viral potential determined by the number of reactions to a specific post and the extent to which specific information reached a larger audience. Between October 2021 and April 2022, the number of activities did not change significantly either.

The exception are the teams around which there was an image change. This applies to Raków Częstochowa club, which increased its viral potential thanks to speculation about coach Marek Papszun and his potential career with Legia Warsaw or in the Polish national team. The response of the club's coach posted in the form of a video on social media had over 100 thousand views and contributed to a significant increase in interest in Raków (https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=575540146882505&id=117607914925776&_rdr). The number of followers on Facebook alone has increased by more than three thousand in that time.

Results:

The observation of the activity of football clubs on Facebook is presented in Table 1. The quantitative analysis of this activity is based on the creation of the coefficient of viral potential. The calculations included in this table focus on the popularity of the sports club's fan page, the number of comments and the number of emotional reactions to the information provided. Both comments and reactions were compared to the number of posts by calculating their average per post.

The next step was to extract the number of information with viral potential, so it was assumed that information with viral potential is that in which the number of reactions exceeds one hundred. In this way, the viral potential coefficient for a specific football club was obtained.

The first conclusion from the collected data is that there is a close correlation between the number of followers and the viral potential. Calculated for the number of followers and the viral coefficient indicate a high correlation between these variables. Pearson's coefficient indicates the strength of this correlation at 0.9501, which means almost a linear relationship. This implies that the more followers a club has, the greater the chances that particular information will be noticed and subject to further distribution by other Internet users. Further

analysis of this issue also leads to the conclusion that the greatest potential has well-known clubs (Lech Poznań, Śląsk Wrocław, Legia Warszawa, Wisła Kraków) or those that are successful at a given time and fight for the championship (Pogoń Szczecin).

A separate issue is whether the counts for these club sites are large enough to define the information as viral. From the data in Table 1, it can be seen that only six clubs managed to reach one hundred reactions, possibly triggering a further reaction. The remaining twelve have a situation where posts are unnoticed. To show this, a category called "popular posts" was introduced to capture the number of posts with more than ten reactions. Despite this narrowing down, the most popular Polish club, Legia Warszawa, had 148 posts, but 14% of them did not reach this threshold of reaction to information. At the end of the list of post popularity is Zagłębie Lubin, whose fan page had only 24 posts that were slightly more interesting to the audience.

The analysis of the number of comments can be approached in a similar way as the reactions to the information on Facebook. The difference between comments and reactions for communication policy is that the reactor (especially the sharer) participates as an intermediary in viral marketing. With his reaction he shows his followers his interest in the topic and the post. The commenter is also an intermediary, but his participation in viral marketing depends on the willingness of the followers to read his comment.

The number of comments correlates even more closely with the viral potential calculated for the number of reactions to information. Pearson's coefficient in this case is 0.9915. However, due to the fact that the number of comments does not reflect the actual popularity of a given post it should not be taken into account in Facebook analysis and in indicating the viral potential. The main point here is that two people can participate in a long exchange of opinions and views. While these can be considered as one of the factors influencing the spread of information, quantitative analysis can lead to erroneous conclusions.

For this reason, in Table 1, the category "Number of comments" and "Average number of comments per post" have no direct impact on the determination of the viral potential index.

The research showed that among the top-level football clubs, out of 3106 posts posted on Facebook, only 206 posts, or 6.63%, received more than one hundred reactions, of which nearly half (101) fell on the two clubs with the highest number of followers. It is also important to remember that the threshold for determining viral potential is relatively low, and this potential is determined mainly by the number of followers. If the threshold were raised to 1,000 reactions during the entire month, only 6 pieces of information would exceed the threshold (out of which Legia Warszawa - 4).

The qualitative analysis of Tab. 1. should focus on the content that can be associated with the viral potential. Observation of the topics that have achieved viral potential on Facebook allows us to conclude that most of them relate to current topics related to sports success, winning a match, favorable transfer, coach's statement or match action. The communication message in practice lacks the elements associated with classic viral marketing, so its use should be assessed as weak. This may be due to factors such as:

- lack of ideas,
- focusing on current information and commenting events instead of their creation,
- lack of understanding of the modern young customer,
- lack of distance to themselves and the club,
- using Facebook (and other social media) as a medium of information and communication, but without emphasis on their wider dissemination.

The result of this approach is that the viral potential is not realized. Recipients of the content either do not share the information or their reaction is not followed up. The conclusion is that Facebook, despite its undeniable importance as a medium in which to focus information is a place of little interest to the modern sports viewer. In comparison, in other countries viral marketing is used in a slightly more interesting way, using collaboration with footballers and protesting (for example) against racism as in the case of Bayern Munich

(<https://www.facebook.com/fcbayern.en/posts/7400649340006076>), or commenting on the results of the cup draw (<https://www.facebook.com/fcbayern.en/posts/7339177782819899>)

Interesting interactions with sponsors, fans, cities or the region were missing throughout the research material. Also missing are elements designed to make users want to share content, even that which is an advertisement (<https://www.facebook.com/es.muellert/videos/1437205822960107/>, <https://www.facebook.com/fcbayern.en/posts/7053344951403185>).

Discussion:

Sports club and other sports organizations in today's media world have been given tools for disseminating information about their activities, communicating with stakeholders, and disseminating them at no cost.

It should be emphasized that by viral marketing on the Internet we also mean a campaign based on direct influence on trends among specific groups of consumers using tools such as:

- keeping blogs,
- fanpage on social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram),
- introducing threads and posts on forums,
- posting original content on sharing and social networking sites,
- collecting feedback from users of selected websites,
- posting comments on thematic forums,
- purchase of advertising space on social networking sites.

sport or athlete.

In the case of the researched sport entities, these activities have been practically limited to social media activity, which are treated as a place for posting one-sided information. Due to the fact that this information does not have the features of a viral medium (it is uninteresting, boring, without humorous elements, without distance to oneself), users either pass by it indifferently or their reaction is not continued. Looking for interesting information, they move their attention to media that are more dynamic, humorous, require less engagement, but give

more emotion. They move to Twitter, commenting on matches in real time on TV station profiles (#ItalianBot, #laliga and others).

The advantages of viral marketing are:

- low cost of reaching customers,
- increase brand awareness and trust,
- reaching a selected target group,
- communication, because the statements of the Internet users constitute excellent research material,
- speed in reaching customers,
- high effectiveness.

Along with these, there are also disadvantages, which include:

- lack of control over its spread of the virus,
- inability to stop the virus,
- falstart.

Looking at what Ekstraklasa football clubs present on their fan pages one can see that they do not use any of the advantages of viral marketing. While in the past one can find examples of an interesting approach to information for a modern audience (<https://gol24.pl/jakub-rzezniczak-jako-james-bond-nowe-dzielo-wisly-plock-wideo/ar/c2-15830415>). Any such humorous approach is also an element of building the image of a club or a sportsman. Just like memes, funny videos with an idea. Besides, viral marketing is not only about humorous, but about information. This one can be a social appeal, a voice of support, an image condemning a war (<https://twojezaglenie.pl/sport-przeciw-wojnie> and others). The essence in this case is positive publicity, showing either the distance between the club and the athletes or social sensitization.

Facebook is a medium where information is concentrated, but it is an increasingly uninteresting place for the modern sports viewer. The modern sports content viewer is a person belonging to the generation looking for interesting content. When using such tools as social media, it is necessary, in order to create one's own image, to move away from formal content towards that which will evoke a positive response. It is not enough here to have viral potential, but there is a need for interesting content, a shot, humorous elements or the importance and emotionality of the issues raised.

Creativity in this area makes it possible to launch a no-cost tool for spreading positive information about a club, organization or athlete, i.e. viral marketing.

Conclusions:

Being aware if viral marketing is, one can avoid its disadvantages, thus using this tool, one can also manage the image of a sports club, sport, association, organization or athlete. Facebook portal is the one that can be considered as a place to build an appropriate image for these entities. The ability to manage it allows you to gain the sympathy of fans beyond the local market. This in turn can lead to increased interest in the club, organization or athlete and bring tangible benefits, including financial ones.

In the context of the study, which is the basis of this article, there are no grounds to reject the head hypothesis. Polish clubs do not fully use the viral potential, and communication activities are based on official messages.

Managing viral marketing in the communication process requires understanding that social networks should be used not only for formal information, but also to create content that motivates people to share. Most often this is humorous content related to the club or athletes, but also social appeals, charitable actions of supra-local scope and others. On the other hand, such management is not easy due to the fact that there is no possibility to stop the virus of a

negative character. Management then consists in reducing the effects of such a virus. The overall action should therefore focus on the following principles:

1. Knowing your audience.
2. Awareness of User Generated Content (blog articles, entire websites, photos, images, social media posts and referrals).
3. Awareness of appropriate time and place.
4. collaboration with influencers.
5. Appeal to current events.
6. Appropriate format (text, video, image) .
7. Quality of execution.
8. Maximum emotional charge.

Such management is therefore about using the advantages and eliminating the negative features. It is important to ensure that the sporting entity knows whether a given piece of information has viral potential and why it has it.

Conflicting Interests:

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

	Number of followers	Number of posts	Average comments per post	Maximum comments	Average reactions per post	Maximum reactions	Number of popular posts (<10)	Percentage of popular posts	Number of posts with viral potential (<100)	Viral potential
Lech Poznań	632400	168	67,1	1600	1906,3	26000	122	0,73	32	0,19
Śląsk Wrocław	224000	131	47,3	1300	505,0	4400	77	0,59	12	0,09
Lechia Gdańsk	201000	208	31,6	589	388,6	3900	120	0,58	11	0,05
Pogoń Szczecin	163778	193	52,8	1600	732,6	6300	139	0,72	22	0,11
Raków Częstochowa	53217	186	20,5	276	320,9	1400	70	0,38	8	0,04
KGHM Zagłębie Lubin	48993	176	4,8	99	62,3	500	24	0,14	0	0,00
Jagiellonia Białystok	120030	213	10,7	165	67,1	1100	54	0,25	6	0,03
Cracovia Kraków	108231	173	11,2	198	198,0	1700	46	0,27	4	0,02
Radomiak Radom	47200	123	20,0	341	316,4	3600	54	0,44	5	0,04
Wisła Kraków	291294	201	26,7	710	434,9	5400	81	0,40	10	0,05
Stal Mielec	26000	180	13,7	198	209,0	2300	54	0,30	7	0,04
Wisła Płock	43389	214	13,5	333	155,6	2700	53	0,25	5	0,02
Piast Gliwice	41179	197	12,5	157	165,6	1600	57	0,29	5	0,03
Górnik Zabrze	152165	133	24,7	301	233,1	1100	77	0,58	6	0,05
Legia Warszawa	921684	173	156,6	1800	2098,2	28000	148	0,86	69	0,40
Warta Poznań	51033	159	11,9	134	160,3	609	51	0,32	2	0,01
Termalica Bruk Bet Nieciecza	36068	147	7,5	113	124,9	113	30	0,20	1	0,01
Górnik Łęczna	27259	131	8,9	113	100,8	113	36	0,27	1	0,01
Razem:	x	3106	x	x	x	x	1293	x	206	x

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- <https://www.facebook.com/fcbayern.en/posts/7400649340006076>
- https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=575540146882505&id=117607914925776&_rdr
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