

THE UNSTABLE PLATFORM: CAN SOCIAL MEDIA MOBILIZE AUDIENCES AND CONSUMERS FOR NON-COMMERCIAL PURPOSES?

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Abstract

Organizations are continually told that social media is an essential component of corporate strategic engagement with 21st century consumers and audiences. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has long been an innovator in the use of new media technologies. It also claims a dedicated fan base, a large percentage of which use social media and the Internet. This paper examines a recent WWE social media campaign to address whether or how an organization can mobilize its audiences or consumers for non-commercial purposes.

In October, 2010, WWE launched “Stand Up for WWE”, a campaign that encouraged WWE fans to use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Internet site visits to express their support for the company. The campaign was launched while Linda McMahon, WWE’s chief executive officer, was running for election as United States Senator for Connecticut. While “Stand Up for WWE” was not explicitly linked to McMahon’s election campaign, it was framed as a response to alleged “attacks” on WWE during the campaign. These “attacks” appeared to be criticisms of WWE by the Connecticut media and by McMahon’s election opponents. While the “Stand Up for WWE” campaign homepage is still on WWE’s website, McMahon lost the election and WWE has not recently promoted the campaign.

Our analysis, drawing on research from marketing and political science, focuses on whether a group sharing a common interest in an organization can be effectively motivated by that organization to action through social media, especially for non-commercial purposes. We suggest that “Stand Up for WWE” was less than successful because of the campaign’s unclear purpose, the mixed role of social media in the campaign, and WWE’s misjudging what its consumers and fans would undertake on the company’s behalf. We also provide recommendations for organizations planning social media campaigns.

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Introduction

Social media have been promoted as not only a means by which businesses can promote their products or services, but also as a way to create a new form of relationship between producer and consumer. Technology allows producers to communicate directly with the consumer, but in most forms of technologically-mediated customer communication, the consumer can also communicate with the producer. The message to businesses is that for customer contact through social media to be valuable, it cannot be the traditional unidirectional “push”; it needs to be a two-way communication. “We need to change the way we interact with our audiences by becoming valued contributors to the conversation” (Murtland, 2010, p. 15). Relationships with customers are built upon these “conversations” and once the relationship is built, transactions (purchases) will then follow (Volmar, 2010).

To date, much of the marketing research investigating businesses’ use of social media has focused on social media usage as a way for companies to build consumer relationships based on the company’s products or message, and to use social media to motivate consumers to buy or use the company’s products or service – in other words, for commercially-focused purposes. Surprisingly, very little existing research has examined the possibility of companies using social media to motivate their consumers or audiences for non-commercial purposes. In this paper, we analyze a recent campaign by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) which used social media in an attempt to mobilize WWE’s audiences and consumers to respond to criticisms of the company. While this may be a somewhat distinctive situation because of the circumstances under which this particular campaign arose - in the middle of a WWE executive’s election campaign - we believe that it nevertheless provides some valuable lessons for organizations on effective use of social media.

Research on Businesses and Social Media

Social media are becoming an increasingly significant part of many businesses’ marketing campaigns and relationships with consumers. Moorman (2010, p. 17) reports the results of the February 2010 CMO Survey, conducted by Duke University in partnership with the American Marketing Association. “Social media continues to emerge as a central component of Internet marketing strategies. Firms currently allocate 6 percent of their

¹ Our thanks to Lori Poljancic for her participation in data collection.

marketing budgets to social media, an allotment they expect to increase to 10 percent during the next year and 18 percent over the next five years.” Along similar lines, Barnes (2010, p. 11) reports on the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Centre for Marketing Research’s third annual study (2009) of social media usage in fast-growing companies (those included in the *Inc. 500* list compiled by *Inc.* magazine). “(T)he *Inc. 500* companies clearly intend to continue immersing themselves in these tools [social media]... When asked if the use of social media has been successful for their business, the overwhelming response is yes. Twitter users report an 82 percent success rate while every other tool studied enjoys at least an 87 percent success level. Measuring success was investigated, and most respondents report using hits, comments, leads or sales as primary indicators.”

Despite these trends, however, there is relatively little research on exactly how social media plays a role in businesses’ interactions with consumers. The research that does exist can be categorized into four streams.

Social media as a source of free marketing research information. This stream of research discusses how social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, and content sharing sites, such as YouTube and Flickr, can be used to: 1) gather demographic information on consumers (age, gender, region of country) and information about consumers’ purchase intentions (Beaubien, 2008; Casteleyn, Mottart & Rutten, 2009; Hardley, 2009); 2) gather insights or suggestions for product/service development (Hingley 2008), and; 3) pilot test new product concepts or advertisements (Barnes, 2010; Beaubien, 2008; Hingley, 2008).

Social media as a facilitator of consumer ‘flocks’ or ‘swarms’. Consumer ‘flocking’ or ‘swarming’ is defined as “a short-term, consumer-initiated aggregation of people on the Internet [who use] their own social collaborations [to] collectively engag[e] in a marketing exchange which would provide each consumer with a superior value than [he or she could obtain] individually” (Bhagat, Klein & Sharma, 2009, p. 84). A consumer (the ‘lead initiator’) sets up a site, perhaps a Facebook group, where they hope to accumulate like-minded people so that they can negotiate a better deal to purchase a certain product or service. All the purchasers get a better economic deal this way. The marketer benefits by moving more stock or clearing out leftover inventory. The group does not stay together indefinitely, but rather re-forms for each opportunity. Social media provide the site to ‘gather’ and also the means to announce what is happening since the initiator can use a pre-existing social network (e.g., a friends network on Facebook) to publicize what is happening. The group does not have to be geographically co-located, and the buying occurs online.

Social media as a way of facilitating and encouraging ‘community.’ This stream of research typically focuses on the company or the marketer. It emphasizes that rather than selling, spamming, pushing or directly asking for the sale, the new model is to let things happen organically; the organization becomes a partner in the conversation and lets the community members take the actions they deem fit. Community does not have to be developed in the “single site” model (e.g. newsgroups, Second Life, or MUDs/MOOs) but can be ‘spread’ across multiple forms of social media; for example, blog comments can point to Facebook pages, content on Facebook can be updated by Twitter, or blog content can be

repurposed as a tweet. There is some sense that a group of followers on a blog can exhibit signs of community (Kozinets, De Valck, Woinicki & Wilner, 2010). Kozinets et al. (2010) explored how 'influentials' (opinion leaders) could be used as part of a word-of-mouth campaign to promote a new cellphone. In this situation, the blogger was the 'influential' and the blog was the word-of-mouth channel used to communicate with their followers. Similar patterns of information distribution have been observed in 'diffusion of innovation' studies (e.g. Rogers, 2003) which highlight the importance of the opinion leader. Murtland (2010) argues that technology makes it possible for anyone to become an influencer.

Moran & Gossieaux (2010) report on a survey of more than 500 businesses that use online communities (the 'Tribalization of Business Study'), conducted in 2008 and 2009. They use the word 'tribalization' to reflect the fact that "these communities often thrive because the members are primarily *drawn to one another* [italics in original]. The importance of person-to-person affinity – and the ability to interact with these other humans – typically trumped the role of the sponsor's good or services or the presence of other features in the online communities." This finding relates to earlier research outcomes indicating that social interaction is the dominant benefit of community participation for the consumer.

Kozinets et al. (2010) note that "marketing messages and meanings do not flow unidirectionally but rather are exchanged among members of the consumer network" (p.73) and that "[c]onsumers are regarded as active coproducers of value and meaning, whose WOM use of marketing communications can be idiosyncratic, creative, and even resistant" (p. 72).

Recent consumer research has highlighted the benefits to marketers of participating in 'brand communities' or product/brand focused groups of consumers. These benefits include increased brand loyalty and repurchase rates, reduction in consumer switching behaviours, increased positive word of mouth, access to grassroots research and suggestions for product improvements and the development of long term symbiotic consumer-marketer relationships (Belk & Costa, 1998; Cova & Cova, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 1992; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Moran & Gossieaux (2010, p. 232) state that "research indicates that word of mouth spread by members of an online community...can create more valuable customers than those attracted through conventional advertising. Communities can also help increase demand for products, help marketers identify key influencers, and provide marketers with insights about customer wants and needs. In addition, organizations are using online communities for customer support, product development, knowledge management, and recruiting."

Reasons why consumers use social media. This stream of research focuses less on businesses' motivations for using social media and more on why consumers choose to interact with businesses, or other organizations or consumers, through social media rather than through other means of communication. It is possible to see this research as being aligned with the knowledge-sharing research on why people contribute to communities of practice, but the more recent emphasis is on communities that do not necessarily relate to participants' professional lives. An example of research into why people contribute to

professional communities of practice is that of Ardichvili (2008) [as summarized in Foster et al. 2010, p. 6] Ardichvili found that “motivating factors for participation and sharing include: profession-related benefits, such as professional and personal enhancement and reputation building, increased self-esteem, developing expertise and material gain; community-related considerations, such as establishing ties with others, building a stronger community and defending against external threats; and normative considerations, such as shared values and vision and reciprocity. The barriers to participation are categorized as interpersonal (e.g., fear of criticism), procedural (e.g., privacy concerns), technological (e.g., lack of aptitude), and cultural (e.g., saving face).”

Stafford & Stafford (2001) apply ‘uses and gratification theory’ to understanding why consumers access the Web. Previous research (based on other media, e.g., television) suggested that motivations for media use could be broken down into two categories: 1) content gratifications, e.g., watching a nightly television news show to learn about local events, and; 2) process gratifications, e.g., taping favorite television shows in order to fast forward through commercials (pg. 23). Stafford & Stafford’s research (2001) revealed several dimensions underlying consumers’ motivations for accessing the web: searching for information updates and resources, web-based learning, experiencing ‘new and unique’ things available on the Web, socializing with friends, and entertainment (fun, games, other forms of entertainment). They argued that the ‘searching,’ ‘learning,’ and ‘entertainment’ dimensions represented a mixture of content and process gratifications. In an earlier study, Hoffman & Novak (1996) argued that web surfing which induced a state of ‘flow’ could produce a form of pleasure. This could be interpreted as aligning with the idea of process gratification.

Stafford & Gonier (2004) studied AOL users, also using a ‘uses and gratifications’ approach, and identified three uses with related gratifications: 1) information search (using the Internet to find and learn about things); 2) communication (noting the ease and access afforded by email), and; 3) socializing (having fun and/or relaxing by chatting with friends, using newsgroups). Chung & Austria (2010), building on previous uses and gratifications research and in particular Stafford’s work, also identify three ‘gratifications’ from internet-based communication: entertainment, information and social interaction. ‘Entertainment’ refers to the extent to which media use is entertaining, exciting and fun. Chen & Wells (1999) found that entertainment value is positively related to users’ attitude toward the website. ‘Information’ refers to the extent to which the website provides users with helpful information (e.g., product or store information). Older research found that information search was one of the main reasons for using a website (Maddox, 1998; Stafford & Stafford, 1998). Social interaction is defined as being similar to “sociability”: “a tendency to affiliate with others and to prefer being with others to remaining alone”.

Focusing specifically on social networking sites, Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2008) found that college (freshmen) students identified both their social and information needs as being met through use of Facebook and MySpace; however, social interaction needs (keeping in touch with old friends and current friends, making new friends) far outweighed information needs in importance. Acquisti & Gross’s (2006) study of motivations

associated with Facebook use among US college undergraduates, graduate students and faculty “reported benefits of social networking sites relate[d] primarily to: meeting social needs, such as learning about or locating former classmates; keeping in touch with people; and, to a lesser extent, sharing information about oneself, social enhancement, and increasing one’s popularity” (summarized in Foster, Francescucci, & West [2010], p. 6).

Foster et al. (2010) note that previous to 2006, studies of online participation tended to focus on two main formats: communities of practice with specific professional purposes, and anonymous communities (chat rooms, bulletin boards, and listservs where pseudonyms or user names other than real names could be used). Although the virtual communities (MSN, AOL Chat) that were studied were quite large, study participants reported chatting regularly with only five other people. Social interaction with a small group was noted as a benefit of participation. Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo (2004) conducted a study of ‘network-based virtual communities’ (email, bulletin boards, Usenet newsgroups) and ‘small-group-based virtual communities’ (realtime chat, virtual games, MUDs). Participation in network-based virtual communities was driven by the need to obtain or provide information to others, while participation in small-group networks was driven by a desire for social connectivity and social enhancement. Foster et al. (2010, p. 6) note that “despite the changes in technological capabilities, social connection and information sharing appear to be enduring motivations for participation in social networks.”

Foster et al.’s (2010) study of young adults’ (18 to 30) use of Facebook revealed five motivating factors: 1) community membership - the need for belonging to a community with a substantial base; 2) friendship connections - the opportunity to maintain ties with existing and old friends; 3) information value - evaluation of content in terms of accuracy, credibility and importance; 4) participation confidence - concerns of inadequacy or the potential to damage one’s image when contributing information; and 5) participation concerns - privacy concerns, potential harm resulting from strangers accessing information posted online.

From this literature, we can see that although many organizations use social media for marketing, information-gathering, and/or community-building purposes, there is a wide range of motivations and desired outcomes among users of social media. This results to some extent in online communities being self-selected and self-directed, even if the original motivation for a community’s creation was a shared interest in a commercial brand, product or service. Self-selection and self-direction appears to occur among online commercially-focused communities even if the company itself founds or administers the community. We now turn to the example of “Stand Up for WWE” to look at whether or how a business can use social media to motivate a community for purposes other than those it was formed around.

World Wrestling Entertainment and Social Media

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is the largest professional wrestling company in North America. Its current form started in 1982 as the World Wrestling Federation; since then it has grown into a “sports entertainment” company that is listed on the New York Stock Exchange and which reported net revenues of \$475 million US in 2009 (WWE Annual Report, 2009b). In addition to producing two weekly television shows and a monthly pay-per-view event, WWE is also involved in various forms of product merchandising, music and movie production, and book and magazine publishing.

A distinctive characteristic of WWE’s history is its continual innovation and early adoption of new media technologies (Neilson & McQuarrie, 2011). For example, WWE’s website was one of the first to use streaming video to deliver video content to online visitors. WWE was also one of the first entertainment companies to start a 24/7 video-on-demand channel, drawing on its extensive archives which include the video archives of several other now-defunct wrestling organizations.

WWE has also been a conscious and strategic user of social media. Its marketing team includes an executive vice president of digital media, a vice-president of web production, and an online community leader (Swallow, 2011). Its digital strategy is to “go where people are nesting, instead of spending marketing dollars to cajole them to consume branded content within the confines of the WWE website” (Swallow, 2011, p. 3). Despite the company’s history of keeping close control over its product and carrying out many production functions in-house (McQuarrie, 2006), WWE recently chose to discontinue the “WWE Universe” forum section of its own website, and is now relying on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as its primary locations for online fan interaction.

WWE has faced some interesting dilemmas with its use of social media, primarily around the fact that its wrestling “superstars” are engaged in storylines that drive interest in the company’s television shows and pay-per-view events, but are also real people with online presences as themselves. Thus, WWE might have to be concerned about whether an online comment by a wrestler - in his/her wrestling persona or as him/herself - could undercut a storyline that the company is trying to play out. Currently WWE has no policy regulating its wrestlers’ use of Twitter as themselves or as their WWE personality, but maintains WWE Facebook pages for each of its performers while allowing the performers to manage their own personal pages.

Another factor driving WWE’s strategy involving social media is that the company’s product has a passionate fanbase who are committed social media users. Passionate fandom has always been a distinctive characteristic of professional wrestling (e.g. Dell, 2006) and fans in the past have used media to express their support: for example, by writing letters to newspaper editors to respond to criticisms of wrestling as sexist or excessively violent (Neilson, 2006). The degree to which WWE fans use social media can be seen from the company’s own statistics. In 2009, the WWE website (<http://www.wwe.com>) received an average of 6.7 million daily page views from United States-based visitors, of which 399,000 were unique views. In the same year, 63% of WWE

viewers played games online and 51% watched streaming video (World Wrestling Entertainment, 2009a).

Stand Up for WWE

It was within this context of established social media usage and enthusiastic fandom that, on October 18, 2010, WWE launched “Stand Up for WWE” (hereinafter referred to SUFWWE): a campaign which was an “invit[ation to] fans to voice their support for the company because it has come under unfair and biased attack from certain politicians and media outlets. WWE will correct factual inaccuracies that have been reported about the company during this election season” (Fans Stand Up, 2010). On the section of the WWE website devoted to the campaign, the company listed several ways in which fans could support the campaign through social media:

1. Forward “Stand Up for WWE” videos to your friends
2. Upload video testimonials to YouTube and Facebook voicing your support
3. Email your friends and family stating why you are a WWE fan
4. Friend WWE on Facebook
5. Make “I’m Standing Up for WWE” your Facebook status
6. Write a letter to the editor of your newspaper
7. Share your favorite WWE stories on Twitter and Facebook
8. Read a story that is unfair to WWE? Email the reporter

(Fans Stand Up, 2010)

The campaign was announced through a video featuring Vince McMahon, the company’s founder, which ran on the October 18 television broadcast of “RAW”, WWE’s regular Monday night wrestling show. The video was also posted to YouTube that same day. After the video was shown on television, postings on the company’s website and Facebook page also announced the campaign. A Facebook page, a dedicated section of the WWE website, a Twitter account, and a YouTube channel solely for SUFWWE were also created. In the days following the campaign’s launch, videos were posted online featuring celebrities, WWE wrestlers, WWE staff, and WWE staff members’ families and children speaking about the importance of the company to them. WWE also posted montage videos highlighting its charitable activities, its work with the U.S. military, and the international scope of its activities.

The Context of the Campaign

Although the only stated motivation for the SUFWWE campaign was to respond to “unfair and biased attack[s]”, the examples of attacks that were cited on the SUFWWE website (Setting the Record Straight, 2010) were from news stories and editorials about Linda McMahon, the company’s long-time chief executive officer, and the wife of Vince McMahon, the company’s founder. Linda McMahon stepped down from her WWE job in September 2009 to seek the Republican Party nomination for the Connecticut seat in the United States Senate. During her run for the Republican party nomination, she was criticized by the Democratic Party for, in the words of New Jersey Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, “buil[ding] an empire peddling violent, sexually explicit material that glorified the exploitation of women, and the mentally disabled” (Whitesides, 2010). During the nomination campaign, the Connecticut Democratic Party directed the media to several YouTube videos taken from WWE broadcasts which showed wrestlers engaging in simulated sexual acts. A few hours after the Democrats’ press release containing this information was issued, the videos were removed by YouTube, allegedly for violating WWE copyright (Bellantoni, 2009). However, the videos in question had been available on YouTube for some time without WWE objecting, and numerous other videos not mentioned by the Democrats but also containing WWE-copyrighted material were not removed. The Democrats later filed a complaint with the Federal Election Commission alleging that WWE and the McMahon campaign illegally colluded to have the videos removed (Thrush, 2009).

After McMahon won the Republican nomination and commenced her official campaign leading to the November 2010 elections, she and WWE faced other criticisms. McMahon herself was criticized for her lack of previous political experience and for the amount of money she was spending on her campaign, most of it from her personal loans to the campaign [Green, 2010]). She was also criticized for comments she made that were interpreted as endorsing a reduction in Connecticut’s minimum wage, while admitting she did not know what the minimum wage was (Barr, 2010). The Democratic Party and other commentators also discussed such issues as WWE’s practices regarding the health of its performers, the deaths of several WWE wrestlers from drug overdoses or suicide, and WWE’s policy of employing its wrestlers as “independent contractors” (and thus avoiding the cost of providing employee benefits such as workers’ compensation payments or unemployment insurance payments). During the campaign, an agency of the state of Connecticut commenced a review of WWE’s reported classifications of its workers to determine whether the “independent contractor” classification was being used improperly to “cut costs” (Lockhart, 2010).

A further controversy erupted during the election campaign when the Connecticut secretary of state announced that voters wearing WWE clothing might be banned from polling stations on election day, on the grounds that this would constitute “campaigning” (Altimari, 2010). Connecticut state law bans campaigning within 75 feet of the entryway to a poll. Vince McMahon filed suit in federal court to contest this declaration, on the grounds that it restricted the right to free expression, and a federal judge ruled that the ban on political apparel would not apply to wrestling apparel. WWE then announced that it would

give away free merchandise on election day outside some election sites (WWE Merchandise, 2010) and also announced “WWE Fan Appreciation Day”, a free wrestling show in Hartford, Connecticut, the Saturday before the election. At that event, Vince McMahon gave a speech in which he denounced the “ridicule [of WWE] by elitists...out-and-out lies by some politicians...distortion and equivocation by some members of the media....Nonetheless, 14 million of us watch WWE on television each and every week here in the United States, which means you stand up for what you want to watch on television. Which means you stand up for what you think is appropriate for your family to watch. Which means you stand up for what you enjoy. It means you Stand Up For WWE” (Clayton, 2010).

The election was held on November 2, 2010. The Democratic candidate, Richard Blumenthal, won with 55.2% of the vote; Linda McMahon received 43.2% of the vote, despite having spent nearly \$50 million on her campaign to Blumenthal’s \$8.7 million (Federal Election Commission, 2010). McMahon has suggested that she may run again in 2012 (Altimari, 2011). After the election, WWE appeared to gradually wind down the SUFWWE campaign. At the end of 2010, WWE won two “Mashable Awards”, which are annual awards recognizing online communities and activities, and are awarded based on online voting. SUFWWE won for “most creative social media campaign” and WWE wrestler John Cena won for “most influential social good champion”. After a flurry of activity encouraging WWE supporters to vote for these awards, WWE’s own SUFWWE webpage and its Facebook, Twitter and YouTube sites for SUFWWE have been largely inactive since January 2011.

Reaction to the Campaign

To attempt to assess the impact of the campaign, we looked at the social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) that WWE asked its supporters to utilize for the campaign. We also used the search term “Stand Up For WWE” in Google to identify other non-WWE online sources (e.g. news websites and blogs) that discussed the campaign. We also investigated whether media outlets had been contacted by WWE fans as a result of the campaign.

YouTube. Within several days of the campaign being launched on October 18, 195 videos tagged “Stand Up for WWE” had been posted on YouTube. Our preliminary analysis indicated that 85 of these videos were fan videos expressing support for WWE, and 37 videos either opposed the campaign or parodied it. Additionally, WWE itself posted 16 videos. On November 1, WWE also posted a video to YouTube that compiled clips from the pro-WWE fan videos that had been previously posted.

20 videos tagged “Stand Up for WWE” were randomly chosen for further analysis. Of these, 13 could be generally characterized as supporting the campaign and seven as opposing the campaign. A number of common themes were present in each group of videos. The creators of the “positive” videos spoke of their personal experiences with WWE

and of how watching wrestling is important to them as a shared activity, particularly with family. Several mentioned the loyalty they felt to WWE and/or the loyalty they felt that WWE showed to its fans. Only one of these videos mentioned “political media” as a reason to defend WWE. However, politics were mentioned in two of the seven “negative” videos. The other common themes in these videos included WWE not being supportive of its fans or caring about them (primarily in that the company was promoting an inferior or boring product) and that it was WWE’s job, not the fans’, to tell the media about the company.

We noted that while very few of the fan-created SUFWWE videos had the “comments” section disabled on the video’s page, all of WWE’s own SUFWWE videos were closed to comments.

Facebook. As of March 2011, the “Stand Up for WWE” page hosted by WWE on Facebook had over 93,000 “likes”. WWE made regular Wall posts on this page in October and November 2010, with many linking to WWE’s series of SUFWWE promotional videos. Since WWE created and controlled the official SUFWWE page, WWE would have been able to report posters making negative comments and/or delete negative comments. Thus, it is entirely possible that negative comments about SUFWWE may have been removed from the Wall section of the SUFWWE page. We note this in the context of our finding that nearly all of the comments we read on the Wall page were positive comments in support of WWE. The general themes of these comments were support for WWE from those who considered themselves true fans. There was a limited amount of reaction specifically addressing the “attacks” on WWE, and most of that came in response to the issue of WWE merchandise potentially being banned from Connecticut polling stations. Interestingly, there was also some negative reaction to WWE’s announcement that it would be handing out free merchandise in Connecticut on election day. Many fans expressed the opinion that fans everywhere, not just those in Connecticut, should get free merchandise as acknowledgement of their dedication.

Since our data were collected some time after the start of the SUFWWE campaign, it was not feasible to trace how many Facebook users had responded to the SUFWWE campaign by posting “I’m Standing Up for WWE” as their Facebook status.

Twitter. There were 155 Tweets posted on the SUFWWE site as of March 2011. The site had 22,572 followers, and the site was following 3,708 other sites. Approximately 90% of the messages on the site were from WWE itself, and hence there was a limited number of contributions from non-WWE participants. Given the number of followers, the number of retweets of SUFWWE messages seemed rather small. The WWE tweets that received the most retweets were “WWE makes Connecticut Secretary of State back down, lifts WWE clothing restrictions at polls” (29 retweets), “Congratulations to the WWE! [SUFWWE] won the ‘Most Creative Social Media Campaign’ award” (27 retweets), and “US Department of Justice threatens WWE on eve of elections” (21 retweets). The fan tweets that received the most retweets were “RT to sign: I am proud to @StandUpForWWE and defend @WWE from unfair & biased attacks!” (over 100 retweets), “You don’t have to STAND UP FOR JUST for WWE, STAND up for ALL the Great Wrestlers out there! Who give there [sic] Heart and soul to entertain you!” (60 retweets), and “I’m not some1 who votes a lot. But Conn banning

voters from wearing anything WWE is 1 of the most freedom infinging [sic] acts for politics 2day" (60 retweets).

Other Online Reactions. There are a considerable number of professional and amateur blogs and websites that discuss the professional wrestling industry. We surveyed those that contained posts about "Stand Up for WWE" to assess their reaction to the SUFWWE campaign. A number of wrestling news sites (e.g. ProWrestling.net [2010]) simply reported on the campaign's launch, without offering a detailed opinion on whether the campaign was a good idea. On those websites that editorialized about the campaign, at best there was a mixed reaction to the campaign. One blogger on a news site observed that the campaign "portrays the company as insecure about its status" and that "it is the kind of action you could imagine supporters of a wrongly accused prisoner taking rather than the fans of a multi-million-dollar company" (Gardner, 2010). Another blogger, while saying that WWE pays its wrestlers more generously than most wrestling companies and also had continually improved its drug testing and treatment policies, stated "Vince [McMahon]: you don't 'get it'. Wrestling fans don't give a rusty rat's ass about anything BUT wrestling when we're watching it. We don't care if your wife is being called out on stupid shit that we know is not true....It's up to her to defend it, not wrestling fans. Wrestling fans want the best product that WWE can put out. And you're not giving it to them, because you've watered it down" (Reneke, 2010). In a number of website articles that we reviewed (e.g. Ruff [2010]), the writers indicated that the declining quality of WWE's product (in their opinion) was why they did not support SUFWWE, rather than any media "attacks" on the company.

Other commentators expressed the opinion that SUFWWE being launched at this particular time was questionable, because WWE had been subject to much worse criticism than what it received during the Connecticut campaign. For example, in 2007, when WWE wrestler Chris Benoit murdered his wife and seven-year-old son and then committed suicide, WWE was criticized, rightly or wrongly, in many major media outlets over such issues as its drug testing policies, its performers' punishing travel and work schedule, and the many deaths of wrestlers at relatively early ages. But, some online commentators noted, WWE had not asked its fans to "stand up" for it then, and that it seemed odd for WWE to ask fans to do so now, in response to comparatively mild criticisms.

Nearly every wrestling blog or website post we surveyed surmised a connection between SUFWWE and Linda McMahon's election campaign. We noted that WWE itself was extremely careful not to make any such connection, beyond mentioning "election season" in some of its online SUFWWE materials.

Media Contacts. Since SUFWWE asked WWE supporters to "write a letter to the editor" and "email the reporter" in response to stories about WWE, we contacted four newspaper reporters in Connecticut whose articles were among those posted by WWE on its SUFWWE website as examples of media "attacks". Our objective was to determine whether these reporters had been contacted by WWE fans as a result of SUFWWE, and, if so, how many times they had been contacted and what the fan comments contained.

Interestingly, two of the four reporters we contacted were not even aware that their work had been quoted on the SUFWWE website. One of these reporters, after visiting the website and looking at their story that was cited, noted, ironically, that the quote attributed to them which was presented as an example of media “misrepresentation” was not actually a quote from their own writing, but a quote from a secondary source included in the story referenced by WWE.

One of the reporters told us that they had not been contacted by any WWE fans, but surmised that this was because their coverage of WWE in the Connecticut election focused on financial issues, which were perhaps not all that interesting to wrestling fans. The other three reporters had been contacted directly by email by WWE fans; in addition, two of these three had also been contacted through comments on their newspaper’s election blog.

All three of the reporters who had been contacted by email said they received only a few messages related to SUFWWE after the launch of the campaign. One of the reporters who also had been contacted via their newspaper’s blog indicated that the blog was moderated, so it was possible that some fan posts had been removed by the site moderator without them seeing the messages. All three characterized the theme of the messages they saw as “I love WWE”, with some messages also including a description of the development of the fan’s own relationship with WWE or an explanation of why WWE was a good corporate citizen. None noticed specific references to the themes of “attacks” on WWE mentioned on the SUFWWE website, or specific responses to the alleged misrepresentation of WWE in the cited stories. One reporter observed that the controversy over WWE merchandise at polling stations generated far more pro-WWE opinion than SUFWWE did.

Analysis

It can be difficult to define “success” for campaigns conducted through social media. Measuring website hits, Google mentions, Facebook “likes”, Wall posts or status changes, or retweets does not indicate the impact or effect of the information being transmitted, unless there is another variable (e.g. sales) that can plausibly be correlated with these activities. In the case of SUFWWE, since there was no clearly defined outcome to the campaign beyond “voic[ing] support” and “correct[ing] factual inaccuracies”, measuring the success of the campaign is difficult. A comparative content analysis of WWE’s media coverage prior to and after the campaign might be able to assess changes in how WWE-related issues were reported, or other actions that could be related to the campaign (e.g. corrections or apologies addressing previous coverage). However, any observed changes or actions could have occurred completely independently of SUFWWE. Using another measure of “success”, it could be argued that SUFWWE was unsuccessful because Linda McMahon lost the election, but since WWE did not explicitly connect SUFWWE with her election campaign, that cannot be used as an indicator of SUFWWE’s success or failure.

Our analysis indicates that the campaign was successful to a certain degree, in that fans did respond to WWE’s prompting to action and did so through the suggested social

media outlets, but that the campaign was less than successful, in that the fans did not express the messages that WWE apparently wanted them to send, i.e. to “set the record straight” on the “facts” about WWE (Kellam, 2010). The WWE fans who expressed support for the company in response to SUFWWE largely expressed their support through reaffirming their fandom or their feelings of affiliation with the company; we found very few examples of fans criticizing or correcting the alleged factual inaccuracies in the media coverage of WWE. SUFWWE was also less than successful in that more than a few commentators used the interactivity of social media to express why they would *not* support the campaign or the company.

We also suggest that the campaign was more unsuccessful than successful for the following reasons:

- SUFWWE was launched during Linda McMahon’s election campaign. As mentioned, while WWE never explicitly connected SUFWWE to Linda McMahon’s election campaign, the media criticisms of WWE that SUFWWE asked its fans to respond to were raised in the context of the election. In other words, the criticisms of WWE that apparently led to the creation of SUFWWE likely would *not* have arisen if Linda McMahon had not decided to run for high-profile elected office; by choosing to become a candidate, she exposed WWE to wider attention because of her longtime personal and professional connection with the company. Thus, it was essentially impossible to disentangle SUFWWE from Linda McMahon’s political activities.

- The criticisms of WWE were geographically localized, while the fan base that was being mobilized was international. The examples of “attacks” that were cited on the SUFWWE website were from newspapers and news websites in Connecticut, from the *New York Times*, and from the campaign materials of Richard Blumenthal, Linda McMahon’s Democratic opponent. While these materials would theoretically be accessible anywhere in the world through the Internet, they all originated from regional and local media and they all dealt with essentially local issues, such as Connecticut employment law. These issues may not have held great interest for WWE fans not directly affected by the outcome of the election campaign (i.e., any WWE fans not eligible to vote in Connecticut), and since these fans are likely the majority of WWE’s worldwide fans/consumers, they may not have felt compelled to act on local issues that had no impact on them. As noted, we found on Facebook that some fans felt that WWE should express its appreciation for its supporters everywhere, not just those in Connecticut who could easily be given free WWE merchandise.

- There was no clear simple message from WWE for fans to transmit. As noted, we found that in their messages of support for WWE, fans did not convey the information that SUFWWE seemed to suggest they convey, which was extensive (e.g. why WWE should not be blamed for the deaths of some of its performers; why WWE, as an entertainment company, deserved Connecticut tax credits for film and television production, and was not abusing tax law by requesting those credits;

what legislated issues WWE did and did not employ lobbyists for; why WWE was justified in contracting for its toys to be manufactured in China; why its television programming was rated PG and was suitable for family viewing; why WWE chooses to employ its performers as independent contractors; what WWE's "Talent Wellness Program" does to combat drug use by WWE employees; the extent of WWE's participation in charity work and visits to US forces serving overseas). In light of this amount of wide-ranging information, it is perhaps not too surprising that the majority of pro-WWE responses to SUFWWE spoke simply of the individual's relationship to the company.

- WWE perhaps did not anticipate that there would be online responses to SUFWWE criticizing the company or the campaign – or, if they were aware of these responses, largely chose not to counteract them, or even try to discourage them. The only example that we located of an official WWE statement acknowledging response to the campaign was a YouTube video posted by WWE on October 20, 2010, in which Vince McMahon spoke of "tens of thousands" of messages of support conveyed through social media, and "1.3 million video views" (he did not mention which site(s) the videos were viewed at). In our assessment, given the concerns that were expressed online about SUFWWE (e.g. whether it was connected with Linda McMahon's election campaign, and why support for WWE was important at this time in the company's history but apparently not at others), the credibility of SUFWWE was damaged when WWE was essentially silent about the criticism the campaign was receiving.

Summary and Conclusion

As noted, SUFWWE was somewhat distinctive in that it involved an organization attempting to motivate its fans/consumers through social media for a purpose that was not clearly connected to the business aspects of the company. Nevertheless, we believe that the case of SUFWWE holds several important lessons for organizations considering the use of social media to mobilize their followers, whether for business purposes or for other goals not directly connected to the organization's mission. We suggest that organizations consider the following points in designing and conducting social media campaigns:

- Make sure the motivation for the campaign is clear. SUFWWE undoubtedly suffered because of its timing during an election and because of its perceived connection with a WWE executive's political campaign. It was not clear to fans/consumers what WWE wanted to achieve with SUFWWE. A campaign to encourage consumer or fan action through social media, or any other form of communication, should have easily identifiable goal(s), and fans/consumers should be able to understand why the company is undertaking the campaign.

- Make sure the motivation for the campaign is justifiable. It was not clear to fans why WWE needed to be defended at this particular time, especially when WWE

had not directly sought expressions of support during much more challenging times in the company's history. For fans/consumers to be motivated to act on an organization's behalf, they must agree with the reasons why the organization is asking for their support, or the organization must be able to persuade them that these reasons are valid.

- Target the appropriate demographic, and/or explain why those outside that demographic should participate in the campaign. SUFWWE attempted to have its fans/consumers convey the company's position on issues arising in the context of an election in a single American state. It was likely unclear to WWE fans outside the state of Connecticut why it was important for them e.g. to respond to an editorial in the Connecticut newspapers owned by the Hearst Corporation that criticized WWE as "a business that turned a blind eye to steroid use and other activities by its wrestlers" (Setting the Record Straight, 2010). Social media may facilitate worldwide response to a local issue, but the relevance of the local issue to the individual social media user outside that location needs to be explicit if the organization desires that user to participate. The same principle should be applied to campaigns that are targeted to demographic groups defined by *any* specific characteristic (e.g. age, gender, social class, political beliefs, income level, educational qualifications) but which would benefit from support from those outside that demographic.

- Recognize that social media are interactive, and respond as much as possible to commentary facilitated by social media. WWE started the SUFWWE campaign and then, other than online posting of regular news and video updates that emphasized the theme of WWE being a good corporate citizen, generally did not acknowledge or counteract the criticisms of the campaign. WWE also gave the impression of discouraging criticism by disabling some of the interactive features of some of the social media channels it used. While WWE may have felt that responding to SUFWWE's critics would not be a productive strategy, this choice may have been interpreted as its being oblivious to the less positive aspects of its public image – which might not convey the impression of an organization worth expressing support for. It may also have appeared that WWE did not understand the interactivity of social media, which is somewhat ironic given the company's otherwise progressive and innovative uses of social media. In a successful social media campaign, the organization should be continuously interactive, rather than just using social media to convey its initial message and then ignoring or discouraging subsequent reaction.

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