



Increasing Casual Fan Engagement Through Social Media Marketing: An NFL Case Study



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Introduction

- **Growing Casual Fanbase:** The National Football League (NFL) has experienced a significant increase in casual viewership, driven by expanded media coverage, fantasy sports participation, and social media engagement.
- **Role of Social Media Marketing:** Social media marketing in sports provides a medium for brands or teams to connect directly to fans in real time. 54% of sports fans express a desire for brands to engage with them on social media.
- **Generational Fandom Shift:**
 - **Millennials:** 42% of Millennials consider themselves avid fans.
 - **Gen Z:** Approximately 21% identify as avid sports fans, while 32% identify as casual fans and 47% report no sport fan affiliation.
 - **Gen Alpha:** Roughly one in three kids born from 2013-2017 watch sports.
- **Trends of Influencers:** Most social media users today follow an influencer because they are considered more relatable than celebrities, as influencers seem more like an 'everyday person'.

Case Study Context

- **Organizational Background:** The Arizona Cardinals, founded in 1898, is the oldest franchise in the NFL, with a fanbase rooted in tradition, resilience, and loyalty.
- **Objective:** Maximizing the social media engagement among casual and new fans for the Cardinals.
- **Target Markets:** Focus on younger audiences without dedicated team loyalty.
 - Millennials (29–44)
 - Gen Z (13–28)
 - Gen Alpha (0–12)
- **Guiding Question:** By employing influencers, how can the Arizona Cardinals leverage influencer-based social media marketing to increase their social media presence among the three target markets?

Method

Market Research:

- Analysis of current social media trends, audience demographics, engagement patterns, and platform reach.

Data Sources:

- Secondary data were gathered from social media platforms and from external sources (SBRNet, US Census Bureau).

Marketing Strategy Development:

- Research findings were incorporated to create a social media marketing campaign with promotions tailored to each generational segment.

Promotions

The following influencer partnership strategies were created based on research findings and tailored to the Phoenix market demographics.



Research Findings

Phoenix Market Profile:

- 42% Hispanic (40% white; 8% African American; 10% others).
- **Millennials:** 30.4% of Phoenix population.
- **Gen Z:** over 25% of new residents in AZ.
- **Gen A:** Nearly 25% of current residents in AZ.

Generations on Social Media:

- **Millennials:** \$2.5T in spending power, 70% follow influencers.
- **Gen Z:** 34% accept ads for free content, 76% value diversity and inclusion.
- **Gen A:** 36M active online users, 70% have Millennial parents.

Promotion-Specific Research:

- **Food trends:** 84% of Gen Z try social media food trends, 67% of Millennials watch cooking videos.
- **Traveling trends:** 88% of Gen Z follow travel influencer, 72% of Millennials are influenced by travel promotion.
- **Lifestyle content:** Hair & makeup, well-being & fitness, and recipe/meal ideas were the top searched topics on social media by Gen Z.
- **Mascot trends:** Gen A favor cartoon characters when making purchase decision, Gen Z and Millennials are more inclined to make a purchase when a brand uses a mascot.

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Strategic Marketing Solutions

The Cardinal Way

Food Influencers, Jack's Dining Room & Señor Foodie:

- Concept: "Finding the best stadium experiences through food".
 - Try/endorse Arizona native and Hispanic foods around stadium.
 - Create 'Cardinals Cuisine' recipe for fans to have a taste of "The Cardinal Way" at home.

Travel Promotion, Avery Woods:

- Influencer showcases a weekend in Phoenix.
 - Saturday- experience Arizona's local culture.
 - Sunday- Cardinals game stadium experience.
 - Shortform lifestyle content, #TravelTheCardinalWay.

Family Influencer, Josh and Katie Brueckner:

- Opportunity for many different styles of content.
 - Weekend vlog- family day at the Cardinals game.
 - Cardinal Wednesday- fans share user-generated content in team apparel or red clothing.
 - Flag Football- NFL Play60 promotion.
 - Get Ready With Me- supporting Cardinals from home.

Mascot-Centered Influencer, Big Red Becomes Big Time:

- Cardinals Mascot becomes an in-house influencer.
 - Memes, behind-the-scenes content, show brand values.
 - Community connections- birthday parties, teaching "The Cardinal Way".

KPI & Future Implications

Key Performance Indicators

- **Engagement:**
 - Interaction rates per post, >5%: National, >10% Local (e.g., likes, comments, shares).
- **Conversion:**
 - CTR: >2%, >30% follower growth, >25% website/app return rate.
- **Sales:**
 - >3% increase in ticket sales, >3% increase in merchandise sales, >6% increase in concession revenue.

Future Implications

It is important to understand the needs of younger fans who consume influencer-based content and follow sports more casually.

- **Food:** Utilize local Mexican culture and cuisine to create food content.
- **Travel:** Opportunity for cross-promotion with tourism department to engage out-of-state casual fans.
- **Family:** The ability to target multiple generations at once, all while targeting current and future lifelong fans.
- **Mascot:** Employ mascots to create new fans in younger generations through social media.

Further Research: Collect primary data via fan surveys to better understand the effectiveness of influencer content formats.