A Content Analysis of NFL Team Online Branding

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Abstract

With yearly revenue in the billions and countless dedicated fans across the globe, the National Football League is the largest and most profitable professional sports league in the United States. Each team has a distinct brand personality that is communicated to fans to increase consumer recognition and strengthen fan loyalty. A content analysis was conducted to identify key elements of branding of NFL teams, examining the websites of the three highest valued franchises to identify their branding strategies. The research found that these teams incorporate comprehensive branding strategies on their websites to showcase their brand personality and interact with fans.

I. Introduction

The National Football League, which generates more than $12 billion in revenue, is the most profitable of the major American professional sports leagues, earning attention from fans around the world (Statista, 2017). Mexico, Brazil, Canada, South Korea, and Germany are just a few of the countries outside of the U.S. with a significant number of people who identify as NFL fans (Statista, 2015). There are several factors that may contribute to the NFL's popularity within the sports community, one of which is the establishment of unique brand personalities for each team.

There are 32 teams in the NFL, and most fans can associate a specific tone or characteristic with each of these teams because of their brand personality. These personalities are often reflective of a combination of traits, including number of wins, team reputation, and fan behavior. Since teams represent different areas of the nation, complete with distinctive histories and prominent figures, fans can choose which team they best identify with, which eventually translates into a virtually unbreakable sense of fan loyalty. Just as consumers prefer to only purchase their favorite brands, sports enthusiasts choose to support their favorite team(s).

Teams communicate their brand personalities to consumers both on and off the field. While behavior during games and press conferences are important elements of a team's overall reputation, the way a team chooses to portray itself directly to fans through its website plays an important role in the establishment of brand identity. Due to its interactive nature, and the importance of an online presence in the digital world, a team's website is one of the most effective ways to directly connect to consumers. To better understand how NFL teams choose to brand themselves online, this study analyzed the websites of the three highest valued

NFL teams—the Dallas Cowboys, New England Patriots, and New York Giants—and examined what key elements of branding they incorporate on their homepages.

II. Literature Review

To determine the key elements of branding, and how brand identity influences consumer loyalty, the following literature review investigates examples of branding in general, in the online market, and in the context of the sports industry.

Key Elements of Branding

To establish the key components of a brand, it is first necessary to define the meaning of "brand." There are various definitions of what a brand is, but an integrated definition refers to a brand as a name, term, design, symbol, or other feature that differentiates one entity from another, and builds both reputation and future expectations of benefit (Miletsky & Smith, 2009; Wood, 2000). Just as different sources each had their own idea of what the term "brand" means, they also identified different components that are essential to creating a brand. Personality, differentiation, and mutual benefit were the most recurring themes.

A brand's personality is much like a human's personality. The nature of the personality influences the way consumers perceive the product, service, or company. This is an important element of creating a brand because it "creates the emotional connection that draws in a target market" and increases the likelihood of consumer loyalty (Miletsky & Smith, 2009, p. 3). Just as people tend to socialize with those whose personalities are compatible with theirs, consumers often gravitate toward brands that exhibit or share their ideal characteristics. A brand's personality reinforces consumers' perceptions of the quality of the brand and its position within the industry. It is also important for a brand to establish a distinct personality as a way to prevent other brands from copying its strategy (de Chernatony & Riley, 1998).

Differentiation is what makes the brand unique and attempts to give it an advantage over competitors. Unlike personality, which associates a feeling or characteristic with a brand, differentiation is the unique selling proposition that separates a brand's product or service from the competition. "Brands operate in a market where differentiation is crucially important" because it affects how a brand positions itself both in the minds of the consumer and its competitors (Wood, 2000, p. 664). Features, such as a secret recipe or a unique cleaning formula, are examples of how brands distinguish themselves within their market (Miletsky & Smith, 2009). Offering a variation of a product or service that is unique gives the consumer incentive to choose one brand over another. Without differentiation, brands would be too similar, thus eliminating the competition and decreasing market growth.

Having a distinguishable personality and a unique position are not enough to make a brand truly essential in the lives of consumers. There needs to be a perceived benefit for the consumer that is derived directly from conducting business with the brand. If a brand can deliver a reciprocal advantage for the consumer that results in a sustainable relationship, then there is a mutual benefit for both the brand and consumer (Clark, 2004). Mutual benefit is what gives consumers the motivation to invest their money in a brand's product or service. If a brand has an appealing personality and a unique product offering, but the consumer does not perceive any value in the transaction, then the brand cannot be successful because it will not generate revenue. When a brand becomes associated with a unique added value, which can only be received via that brand, consumers become more confident in the quality of the brand and eventually will be more loyal when making purchasing decisions (de Chernatony & Riley, 1998). Earning consumer loyalty is the ultimate goal when establishing a brand.

A brand is a representation of a company, person, or group that connects and communicates with consumers to remain relevant. Brands grow and adapt with trends and must constantly be conscientious of how they are perceived in the minds of the consumer. However, it is important that a brand remains true to its original purpose and does not lose its identity as it adjusts based on consumer needs (Clark, 2004). By emphasizing the key elements of branding, such as personality, differentiation, and mutual benefit, companies can ensure that their brands are able to gain consumer trust, confidence, and loyalty—resulting in wide recognition and longevity for the strongest brands.

Online Branding

In today's digital age, technology and online platforms have become integrated into the daily life of the consumer. With the availability of smartphones, laptops, and tablets, consumers can access the internet in seemingly any location. This accessibility to the internet, combined with the advent of social media networks, allows users to remain constantly connected to their family, friends, coworkers, and even their favorite brands. To better reach consumers through digital platforms, brands must first understand online consumer behavior, online branding, and how to establish an online presence.

Any brand trying to remain relevant in the digital world can benefit from understanding how and why consumers are using the internet. Online consumer behavior passes through three stages of development: intention, adoption, and continuance (Cheung, Chan, & Moez, 2005). The consumer's intention describes the reason for visiting a certain site or using a specific app, and is essentially the driving force behind their online activity. After the user accesses the site, several factors influence if the user decides to remain on the platform. The consumer's adoption of the site's message and decision to continue browsing on the site are influenced by the physical characteristics of the website, such as design, navigation, ease of use, interface, and usefulness, as well as characteristics of the company itself, such as brand reputation and service quality (Cheung et al., 2005). The website is often the first point of contact between the consumer and the brand, so it is crucial to ensure that it delivers the right message that will encourage the consumer to revisit the page later. The consumer's continued use of website is the decision to repurchase from or revisit a site that he or she has already visited. Most often, consumers will not continue to use a site if they do not have a positive experience upon the first visit. Brands can increase the likelihood that consumers will continue to use their sites if they understand the reason for the customer's visit, the first impressions of the site, and if the site meets the user's expectations. An increase in website traffic creates an increase in brand awareness and recognition, leading to a stronger position for the brand in the mind of the consumer.

Website content and design is an important aspect of online branding. Some brands fail to successfully reach their consumers because they do not go beyond simply creating a website. The rapid growth of technology and online platforms makes "brand building increasingly important in providing continuity and customer commitment" across multiple interfaces in a recognizable and interactive manner (Rowley, 2004, p. 228). If a website does not convey the same tone or message as television commercials or magazine advertisements, then consumers will not form a concrete association with the brand. To ensure a cohesive message across all media, a brand should utilize one marketing communication strategy with an integrated brand message (Rowley, 2004). Just as the brand personality is a representation of the entity as a whole, the website should be a direct reflection of the brand.

After creating a website that communicates the brand's message to consumers, the company or group will want to maintain the website and ensure that it reinforces the brand's online presence. An online presence is determined by the way a person or company utilizes social networks and online tools to build and maintain a personal brand (Harris & Rae, 2011). As social media continues to grow, consumers now expect most companies to have a strong online presence complete with a website and multiple social media accounts. Brands that take advantage of the opportunities that digital trends provide can distinguish themselves from those who are slower to adapt, and therefore not as relevant to the consumer (Harris & Rae, 2011).

Sports Branding

The professional sports marketing industry encompasses the sales of team gear and apparel, game tickets and experiences, and media packages and conferences. The variety of products and services offered by a sports league requires strong branding of a team to ensure one cohesive message is delivered to consumers. For a sports brand, it is necessary to consider how the consumers are interacting with the brand, what role the players have in the identity of the brand, and what methods other teams within the same league are using to establish their brands.

With most brands, websites are frequently used to interact with consumers and develop a stronger relationship. Since websites play a crucial role in the development of a brand community, and the sports industry is filled with countless fan-based communities, websites become the instrument through which fans can connect with their favorite teams as well as with other fans (Seo, Green, Ko, Lee, & Schenewark, 2007). If sports brands understand what brings fans to their websites, they can better tailor the site's content and

design to increase traffic and encourage continued website use. A survey conducted of NFL team website users found that fans were more likely to visit the website of a team that they already felt some sort of commitment or connection to, and were more inclined to be satisfied with that web experience and revisit the site if it exhibited the features or characteristics they already associated with that team (Seo et al., 2007). This information reemphasizes the importance of a cohesive brand message and communication strategy. Teams with effective branding strategies have stronger consumer-team relationships, and as a result will generate more revenue (Tsiotsou, 2013).

When a sports team is developing its brand, it needs to take into consideration the personalities and reputations of the players on that team. Likewise, when a team is drafting new players, it is important to account for the player's personal brand and evaluate whether or not it will impact the team's brand personality. The personal brand of the athlete can be a valuable asset to the team, especially when a high-profile athlete joins a team with a weak branding strategy (Williams, Kim, Agyemang, & Martin, 2015; Yang, Shi, & Goldfarb, 2009). The athlete's brand brings more dimension to the team's brand because it incorporates the athlete's personality and is subject to change based on performance. As master brands have one or two strong product brands, a strong team with a strong athlete brand will be able to differentiate itself from competing teams (Williams et al., 2015).

Differentiation is especially important within the sports industry because a large number of teams all play the same sport, and fans must decide which team they prefer based on a limited amount of unique characteristics. Since there are 32 teams within the NFL, the way teams represent their brands on their websites is crucial to strengthening relationships with fans. Fan loyalty frequently outweighs the team's actual winning record because even when a team is experiencing a losing season, fans often line up to see their favorite players take the field.

Based on prior research and the literature review, this study raised the following research questions:

RQ1: How do top NFL teams incorporate brand strategy on their websites?

RQ2: How does branding strategy influence the consumer's experience?

III. Methods

To better understand how NFL teams incorporate their personal brands on their websites, this study conducted a qualitative content analysis of the three highest valued NFL teams. Using the key elements of branding identified in the literature review, the websites were analyzed based on the appearance of the homepage and the presence of personality, differentiation, and a mutual benefit or consumer value. The homepage is the first impression that the consumer receives, so it is crucial that it implements a cohesive branding strategy.

The teams with the highest franchise value were sampled for this study because they exhibit measurable characteristics of success within a competitive, professional sports league. These teams are the Dallas Cowboys, New England Patriots, and New York Giants. The branding strategies used by these teams will provide insight into how NFL teams develop their personal brands and use them to drive sales among fans. The revenue and total value of each team can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. NFL team revenue and total value in 2016

Team	Revenue	Total value
Dallas Cowboys	$700M	$4.2B
New England Patriots	$523M	$3.4B
New York Giants	$444M	$3.1B

Source: Statista, 2017, https://www.statista.com/statistics/193534/franchise-value-of-national-football-league-teams-in-2016/

IV. Findings and Results

The study found that each team's website exhibited the three main elements of branding as determined from the literature review. Brand personality was evident by the incorporation of team colors, logos, fonts, and player images, as well as the tone conveyed through various images and text. When looking at the homepage, it is clear which team's website the viewer is visiting, and the tone conveyed by the site seems to fit with the general personality associated with that organization. An example of the inclusion of brand personality on the team's homepage is represented in *Figure 1*. The New England Patriots are known for their five Super Bowl championships, and for having a superior attitude in comparison to other NFL teams. The depiction of quarterback Tom Brady and head coach Bill Belichick posing victoriously with the Lombardi trophy and the multiple mentions of "five-time champions" on the homepage align with the Patriots' boastful brand personality.


Figure 1. Brand personality displayed on the New England Patriots' homepage.

Similarly, the Dallas Cowboys also used pictures of players Byron Jones and Ezekiel Elliott in the background of their website to emphasize their athlete-team personality. These photos, unlike the ones of Brady and Belichick, were not in full color and instead were only in tones of blue or white—emphasizing the Cowboys' team colors. The tone of these photos was more serious than the celebratory nature of the photos on the Patriots' homepage, and featured Jones and Elliott holding their jerseys and making direct eye contact with the camera. On the other hand, the New York Giants did not feature any athlete on their homepage, but rather a compilation of the team logo and name in various fonts and a monochromatic blue color scheme.

Since each team has its own brand personality, it becomes easier to distinguish them, especially when they have different winning records or notable headlines to emphasize on their websites. However,

because each team is a member of the NFL, the layouts of their websites are similar in adhering to NFL regulations and guidelines. This is where personality and differentiation become essential, because each website would otherwise be too similar and lose the appeal that fans are searching for when they visit online. The teams were able to differentiate themselves from the other teams in the league by featuring an event, player, or other element unique to them. For the Patriots, this was shown in the form of their recent Super Bowl win, and also in a raffle to win tickets to the Patriots 2017 season opening night. The raffle opportunity was not featured by other teams, and gave Patriots fans a unique advantage over fans of the Giants or Cowboys. The Cowboys' website has a specific section for fans, which does not exist on the other websites, that contains exclusive opportunities and content only available for the Cowboys fan community.

To add a unique element to their website, the New York Giants chose to highlight the upcoming NFL draft and the availability of a Giants app. While the draft is mentioned on the other team's websites, the Giants had a specific feature that allowed fans to track the progress of the draft, and follow the results live either through the website or the mobile app, as shown in *Figure 2*.
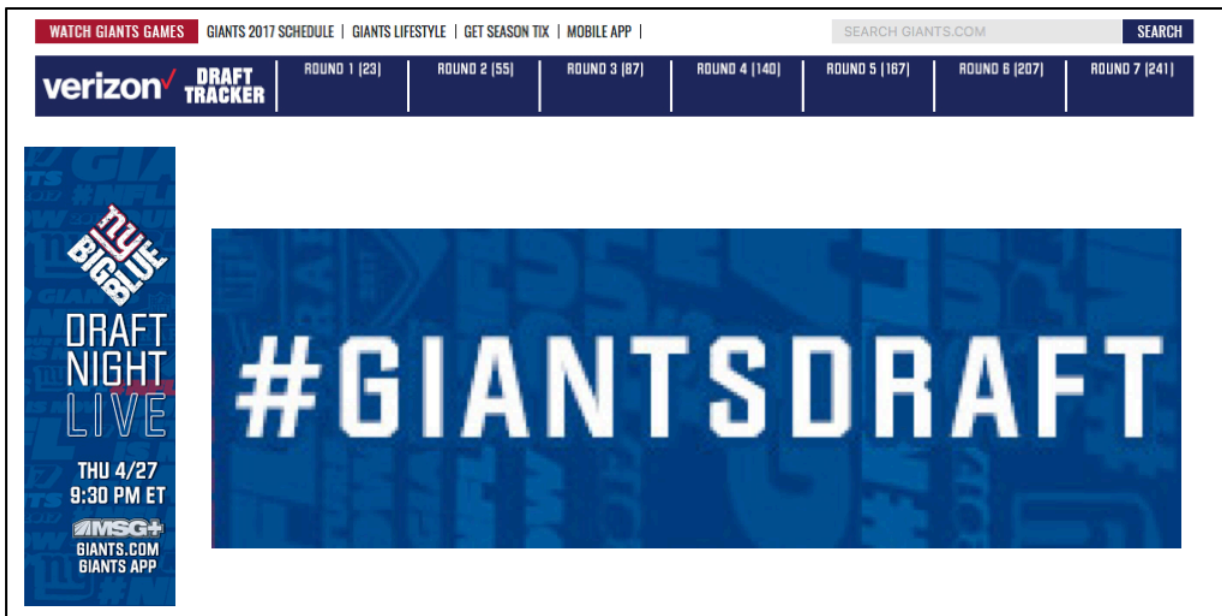
Figure 2. Differentiation utilized on the New York Giants' homepage.

The unique opportunity to follow along with the Giants during the NFL draft also provides a benefit to the consumer that is mutually beneficial to the Giants. When fans tune in to the draft through the Giants website or mobile app, it is driving traffic to that site and increasing brand awareness and recognition for the team. The fans are getting an exclusive experience and the Giants gain more attention and influence fan loyalty. Creating an added value for the consumer is a key element of branding because it provides the consumer with a reason to care about the brand and become more invested. Each team offers an element of mutual benefit on their websites in the form of exclusive stories, fan sections, contests, etc. The Dallas Cowboys emphasize the role of the fan and encourage their direct communication on their homepage, allowing fans to send emails to the team and answering them. The team highlights a recent question on their homepage as a way to show users that the Cowboys care about their fans' opinions, found in *Figure 3*.

COWBOYS MAILBAG   SPONSORED BY   **lite**

"Why did the Cowboys release Romo? He can still retire without being released. Why would the Cowboys not want to retain his rights in the event that he decided to come back to football? One QB injury to the right team and we would be looking at a nice compensation via trade."

— J. TIDWELL

FORT SMITH, AR

READ ANSWER   ASK A QUESTION VIA EMAIL

Figure 3. The Cowboys answer fan mail and display them on homepage to add consumer value.

Each team incorporates personality, differentiation, and mutual benefit in the branding strategies on their websites, as shown in Table 2. The website design and content is user-friendly with clear page headlines and links to other information and websites that fans may find interesting. The similar structure of the three teams' website makes it clear that they all belong to one parent organization, but the ability to personalize content and add unique features gives each team the opportunity to separate itself from the competition.

Table 2. NFL teams exhibit key elements of branding on website homepages

	Element of Branding		
Team	**Personality**	**Differentiation**	**Mutual Benefit**
Dallas Cowboys	Tough, intimidating imagery	Exclusive page for the Cowboys fan.	"Cowboys Mailbag" – Q&A with fans
New England Patriots	Success-oriented, featuring strengths	Super Bowl wins and winning record	Exclusive fan raffle for game tickets
New York Giants	Team-oriented	NFL draft tracker	New York Giants mobile app

V. Discussion

All three of the teams analyzed displayed clear and cohesive branding strategies on their websites. Since they are the most valued NFL franchises, it can be assumed that they have strong brand recognition among fans, as well as distinct personalities. The websites are merely a platform for communicating the brand message with consumers and connecting with fans around the world. From the results, it can be inferred that no singular element of branding can be used by itself, so a combination of branding methods must be implemented to develop a strong brand identity.

For the Dallas Cowboys and the New England Patriots, a select few individual athletes played a major part in communicating the brand's personality. The New York Giants chose not to feature a specific player on the homepage, but rather focused on the team as a whole. These choices are reflective of the personalities of the teams themselves. The Cowboys rely on a tough and intimidating image to set them apart and the Patriots choose to focus on their strongest players and most notable accomplishments, while the Giants take pride in their comprehensive team history and do not promote the achievements of a singular player. All three of these teams are exhibiting brand personality, but they show it in different ways because of their respective reputations.

Their personalities were also expressed through their methods of differentiation. The New England Patriots were easily distinguishable from the other teams because they are the most recent Super Bowl champions. By emphasizing this across the homepage, it becomes clear that this team is unlike the competition because it is the league champion. The Giants' emphasis on the team as a whole is relayed through the focus on the upcoming NFL draft, because the draft signifies the beginning of building a new team. Taking a completely different tone, the Cowboys are often referred to as "America's Team," and they place a clear value on the fan's experience when visiting their website.

Each team benefits from the attention and loyalty of fans, simply due to the nature of sports. As a result, it is essential that the fan receives a benefit from visiting the team's website and interacting with them. Whether it is in the form of exclusive interviews, a fan-based community, or the satisfaction of a winning record, the teams offer various benefits for fans no matter what their interests may be.

VI. Conclusion

Teams with weaker brand identities can look to these NFL leaders as an example of how to successfully implement a cohesive brand strategy across multiple platforms. Sports branding differs from traditional corporate branding due to the dynamic nature of athlete-team relationships and team-consumer relationships. Teams rely more heavily on fan loyalty and recognition than most brands because a majority of their revenue is generated from ticket and apparel sales, regardless of its win-loss record.

This content analysis aimed to identify the key elements of branding that were utilized by the most valued, and arguably most successful, franchises in the NFL. The Dallas Cowboys, New England Patriots, and New York Giants all demonstrate comprehensive, integrated brand strategies on their websites. The websites were chosen as the framework of measurement for this analysis because of the ability to communicate directly with the consumer and offer a more complete brand representation than may be found on a social media profile or other media outlet.

This study analyzed only the top three NFL teams that provided sufficient evidence of the successful branding strategies within professional football. More comprehensive data could be gathered for future research if all of the teams and their branding strategies were analyzed. In the same vein, if a researcher was able to assess the teams' social media accounts as well as their websites, it could create a better understanding of each team's online presence. Overall, this research provides a good starting point for analyzing the way NFL teams choose to represent themselves to fans and consumers.

Acknowledgments

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