

## **INCREASING FAN ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE CREATION OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY**

In today's sports environment, it has become impossible for teams across most disciplines to ignore or downplay the importance of fan engagement. As a matter of fact, engaging fans and making them feel part of the club they support is crucial to each team's ability to sell tickets and merchandise, and subsequently to secure lucrative sponsorship deals. For these reason, an ever-increasing effort is being made by sports teams' marketing departments all over the world to understand the supporters' needs and preferences and devise an appropriate strategy to convey a sense of involvement between them and the club.

Despite the widely acknowledged strategic importance of fan engagement, it would appear as though Italian basketball clubs have yet to commit to keeping the fans engaged and are not making the most out of the available platforms. As a result, 50% of our top-division basketball clubs (8) do not have an official app in the Google Play Store yet (7 in the App Store). In addition, most of the existing apps are extremely basic in terms of content, further displaying a lack of focus on fan engagement. The absence of an official app is sure to hold back a club's effort to keep fans engaged; in fact, an app should be regarded as a primary vehicle in the process of delivering content that is appealing to supporters, with a view to strengthening the bond between the club and the fanbase. Ideally, this app should be perceived by fans as a virtual hub where they could get involved in their club's life. For this reason, I believe that Italian clubs should not be thinking of an app merely as a log of the team's calendar, standings and scores; instead, they should be thinking of an app as a social media-like environment dedicated to the fans. The case of the Brisbane Broncos of the Australian NRL (National Rugby League) provides evidence that the development of such a shared virtual environment could turn out to be extremely beneficial for both parties.

In October 2017, the Brisbane Broncos partnered with FanTribe to launch a dedicated app, promising that it would provide value both to the producer (the club) and the consumers (the fans). The rationale underlying this initiative was the clear link between fan engagement and loyalty. The two main ways used by this app to encourage fan engagement are creation of digital content and the use of social rewards. The increasing demand for digital content reflects the seemingly unstoppable rise of social media: as a consequence, sports fans everywhere expect content that goes beyond the games' highlights. To satisfy the supporters' thirst for "insider" content, the Broncos app features a social media feed that closely resembles the typical Facebook or Instagram feed. The idea is to create an exclusive virtual space for the fans and the club. The feed is populated by all sorts of content in an effort to keep the fans engaged: along with videos and photos from the games, the feed includes content from the team's practices, behind-the-scenes videos from the locker room, and footage of the players' initiatives in the community. Furthermore, the feed also features pre-game pump-up videos, birthday celebrations and, most importantly, lets fans share their own content, subsequently cementing their bond with the team and making them feel integral part of the club.

It could be argued that this aspect of the FanTribe Brisbane Broncos app could be successfully replicated by most Italian clubs. Additionally, our clubs could also replicate some of the most successful content formats that have already been applied in a sports context: examples include the “24 seconds” section created by the NBA, where players participate in a quick Q&A about off-the-court topics, the “Drive Inter” feature by FC Inter Milan, where players engage in a chat with an Inter TV journalist while driving to the training center, and the creation of the hashtag RMFANS by Real Madrid: here, fans are encouraged to post their own content and include this hashtag in the caption, with the Real Madrid Instagram account reposting the best ones. Due to the impact of social media on the younger generations and the relatively young audience that characterizes basketball in Italy, I believe that the creation and development of a virtual community (a “Tribe”, as in the case of the Broncos), where fans can feel like an active part of the organization they support would go a long way towards increasing fan engagement.

The second strategy used by the Broncos app to target their fans is represented by the use of social rewards. The social rewards offered by the Broncos come as part of an innovative strategy based on loyalty points. Broncos fans start accumulating loyalty points in the very moment they sign up: as a matter of facts, the fans will earn their first loyalty points by giving the app permission to access their own personal data. This represents a win-win situation for the producer and the consumer: while the consumer immediately starts accumulating points, the club is granted free access to personal data that will be used for marketing research. Once the fans become registered users, they will be presented with countless opportunities to accrue loyalty points, in order to ultimately be eligible for a reward: completing the FanTribe profile after registering, recommending the app to friends and simply opening the app once a day are all ways to earn loyalty points. Furthermore, users will accumulate points by answering polls and filling out surveys: again, this allows clubs to collect valuable marketing data for free. Nonetheless, the recreational section of this app is arguably the most engaging and entertaining: fans can indeed take quizzes on the team’s history, play various digital games and make a match prediction to earn loyalty points. In order to stimulate the audience, the rankings of the most loyal fans and best quiz-takers are available within the app. In the app, users will compete for weekly and season prizes which will be awarded to the most loyal fans.

The loyalty points accrued by each member are subsequently converted into tokens, which can in turn be redeemed to get access to the rewards: the rewards offered by the Broncos app are several and very different in their nature, ranging from discounted match tickets to “money can’t buy” experiences, including a coin toss at a home game. An alternative way for fans to redeem their tokens is to take part in the so-called Flash Sales, where the club’s merchandise is offered at a greatly reduced price for a limited period of time.

The concepts and formats could be smoothly implemented in the context of Italian basketball; nonetheless, almost every Italian club has yet to make an effort to apply them to their fanbase. An encouraging sign was the recent launch of the Virtus Bologna app (February 2018), which features a system based on loyalty points and a very basic social rewards strategy. The example

set by the FanTribe app would provide every team with a unique range of opportunities to deliver engaging content to the fans. Our clubs should then endeavor to create a recreational section in a basketball context. Potential ideas include:

- Vote the MVP of the game/ Vote the play of the game in exchange for loyalty points.
- Guess the exact score of the game: due to the high-scoring nature of the game of basketball, clubs should consider awarding a significant prize to a fan who correctly predicts the score.
- Playoff Brackets: in the USA, playoff brackets an integral part of the college basketball tradition. Through their apps, Italian clubs could encourage fans to fill out their brackets at the start of the Serie A playoffs, awarding a standard amount of loyalty points to each participant and a growing number of points based on how correct the predictions are.
- Quizzes on the club's history: as mentioned above, the Broncos app features several rugby quizzes. I believe that these could eventually become a valuable tool for half-time entertainment in basketball; for instance, when one club is playing a home game, it should consider organizing a live quiz at halftime. The fans will take part in the quiz from their app, and the quiz could feature questions with a rising degree of difficulty, in order to gradually eliminate participants. After a pre-established number of questions, the quiz will terminate and the fans who answered every question correctly will be awarded a prize.

As for prizes and rewards, it would be desirable to offer a mix of "down-to-earth" rewards (such as free food or beverage at a game or discounts on tickets) and "money-can't-buy" experiences. Some "money-can't-buy" experiences (whose feasibility is unverified) that could potentially be offered include:

- Sitting on the bench for a quarter
- Pre- or post-game access to the locker room
- Announcing the team's line-up to the crowd before the tip-off
- Autographed jerseys
- Out-of-the-ball activities in cooperation with the sponsors

In addition to the benefits reaped by the club and the fans, the creation of a virtual hub to foster fan engagement could prove to be extremely beneficial for the sponsors of the clubs. As a matter of facts, featuring a social media-like feed would generate potentially unlimited opportunities to increase the exposure of the sponsors' brands, either through sponsored posts or product positioning in photos and videos of the team's games and practices. In addition, the sponsors could also get involved in the offering of social rewards in several ways: through the club's app, they could potentially launch flash sales exclusively targeting the members of the app, or they could also offer prizes related to their area of competence.

In order to attract fans to the games and boost the attendance, the purchase of tickets should be the biggest source of loyalty points. In turns, cumulative loyalty points should also be the

discriminating factor when tickets for a specific game are in high demand: a club should sell tickets in advance on a loyalty-point basis for the most important games. This system is extremely common in most developed countries and it is widely regarded as fairer and more efficient. In order to encourage fans to bring their children to the game, Italian clubs could also consider awarding double loyalty points for the purchase of child tickets.

Potentially, the scope of the apps that Italian clubs should create could extend beyond this: for instance, the clubs should strongly consider using the app as their primary ticket marketplace. This initiative could eventually lead to a much desirable “paperless” ticket system, which would eliminate paper waste and reduce the likelihood of ticket fraud at once.

In summary, implementing this strategy in the context of Italian basketball would certainly add great value to the entire movement: as a matter of fact, creating a virtual environment to be shared with supporters would be beneficial for all parties involved, namely the club itself, the fans and the sponsors. The clubs’ willingness to invest in this project would signal their intention to modernize a movement that is often perceived as obsolete, especially when compared to the fan engagement strategies applied by the NBA franchises. It is therefore imperative that Italian basketball clubs understand that fan engagement should not be taken for granted, but rather constantly boosted and stimulated. A meaningful commitment to increasing fan engagement will strengthen the bond between the team and its fans, likely resulting in increased attendance and merchandise, simultaneously maximizing the exposure of sponsors. I therefore believe that the development of an app based on the Brisbane Broncos app created by FanTribe would be the most efficient way to achieve these objectives.