Using Stewardship to Cultivate Fandom Online: Comparing How National Football League Teams Use Their Web Sites and Facebook to Engage Their Fans

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Social-media consultants and strategic communication firms have promoted the use of social media by organizations because of their supposed advantages for developing relationships and online communities around the brand. However, critics have challenged these supportive voices because of organizations’ limited control over the sites’ design and the lack of demonstrated return on investment for social-media endeavors. Using the 26 National Football League (NFL) teams with an official Facebook presence, this study compares how public relations practitioners use the NFL teams’ Web sites and Facebook pages to cultivate relationships with fans using stewardship strategies promoted by public relations literature. Results indicate that the NFL teams overwhelmingly favor their own Web sites for relationship-building endeavors over Facebook for 27 of the study’s 33 measures. Explanations for the divergence from consultants’ advice are discussed and grounded in new-media and sports communication research from various scholarly perspectives.

Keywords: online communication, fan communication, relationship building

For the past 10 years, two of the biggest trends in the practice of public relations have been the increased attention paid by practitioners and scholars to the topics of relationship development and social media. Fueled by profiteering consultants and agencies seeking to outshine their competitors, public relations practice is increasingly becoming focused on social media as one of the most appropriate venues to develop relationships with stakeholders (Li & Bernoff, 2008; Solis & Brekenridge, 2009). Professional development workshops and webinars are quickly put together to offer insights into how the newest Web 2.0 tools can be used to foster relationship growth, and scholarly research often follows with discussions of the benefits of creating online communities and reaching out to stakeholders using social-media tools. Although blogs, Twitter, and social-networking sites certainly
have the potential to create a community’s environment where external stakeholders may be receptive to an organization’s messages, public relations studies routinely publish results that indicate only modest attempts at interactivity and relationship building in the social-media sphere (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Cho & Huh, 2010; Hickerson & Thompson, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

There have been a handful of critical voices that question whether social media can serve as a solution for advancing the organization–public relationship. Kent (2008) encouraged the industry to use a critical eye to examine the blogosphere and its potential benefits before adding it to an organization’s communication toolbox. Others have echoed the call for increased scholarship to determine the true potential of relationship cultivation on social-media sites before organizations pour more resources into venues that have produced little evidence of short- or long-term financial benefits (Hearn, Foth, & Gray, 2009). One of the first studies examining organizational benefits from establishing a social-networking-site presence was not overly supportive; Vorvoreanu (2009) found that individuals were apathetic to organizations attempting to establish a presence on Facebook and other social-networking sites. They may not have felt strongly against organizations having a Facebook account, but they were not overly supportive.

Advice from consultants and social-media handbooks suggests that it is easier to develop an online community supporting an organization by reaching out to stakeholders where they are online rather than attempting to draw visitors to an organization’s Web site. However, increasing numbers of critics caution that participation in social media, particularly social-networking sites, can limit organizations’ freedom by forcing them to create an identity that fits predetermined categories from the social-networking site (Constantinides, Romero, & Boria, 2009; Mulhern, 2009). No doubt organizations have more control over their own Web sites than social-networking sites, where others can post negative comments and challenge organizational messages, but does the sacrifice of complete control outweigh the challenge of driving visitors to an organization’s Web site?

This study attempts to answer this question by comparing the relationship-building efforts of organizations on their institutional Web sites and their official Facebook pages. Specifically, this study compares how football teams from the National Football League (NFL) create fandom in these two virtual spaces by incorporating elements of stewardship in their relationship-building endeavors with their fans.

Literature Review

Relationship Cultivation and Fandom

Although it took more than 15 years since first being introduced by Ferguson (1984), the past 10 years of scholarship have made the organization–public relationship one of the discipline’s most studied theoretical paradigms. Relationships are “represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18). Scholars have taken interdisciplinary approaches to understanding relationships with a variety of stakeholders, but one relationship has largely gone unstudied by the academy: the relationship with sports fans.
Literature on the sports culture characterizes fans as having shared feelings of sympathy and camaraderie with the sports team or individual that they support, as well as with others who support the same team or individual (Depken, 2001; Giulianotti, 2002). Often, sports fans spend a significant amount of time following on- and off-field news about their favorite teams and players (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). What distinguishes sports fans from other organizational stakeholder groups is that they frequently share these experiences in social networks (Benigni, Porter, & Wood, 2009; Boyle, 2004). Through this creation of fandom, sports fans stand apart from those with only casual interest in the sporting teams and events.

Given that these devoted individuals are generally more invested in the organization–public relationship than the average consumer, the sports teams they follow may have a vested interest in creating long-lasting loyalty among the fans. Traditional public relations activities, as well as online communication, can enhance those feelings and foster relationship growth. Hon and Grunig (1999) proposed a litany of relationship-maintenance strategies that could be used to reach out to organizational stakeholders. Most of these strategies were modified from interpersonal communication strategies; however, four were specifically derived from public relations practitioner behavior in conjunction with communication theory. Kelly’s (2001) conceptualization of stewardship outlines specific practices that practitioners can use to cultivate relationships with any external audience.

**Stewardship**

Some of the initial pieces conceptualizing the value of pursuing a relationship-management approach for public relations focused on how the four key components of stewardship support organizational goals (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The four dimensions of stewardship as outlined by Kelly (2001) are reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing. These relationship-cultivation strategies highlight the strategic value of relationship management and serve as the “final but missing step in popular formulas for describing the public relations process” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 17) that ensures ongoing relationships with an organization’s stakeholders.

The first element of stewardship focuses on reciprocity, which involves the recognition of stakeholders and demonstrations of gratitude for their involvement with the organization. This practice has been echoed through sports communication literature; Depken (2001) stressed the importance of the NFL’s recognition of its diverse set of stakeholders for team loyalty to thrive and sustain league expansion. Likewise, Anderson (2008) used historical methods to demonstrate that one of the greatest benefits that emerged from the NFL commissioner’s hiring of a public relations director was not the director’s appreciation and recognition of these stakeholders but his celebration of NFL fans. Scholars have noted that these expressions of recognition and appreciation by management of sporting teams are tied to an organization’s reputation and fans’ loyalty (Lapio & Speter, 2000).

The second stewardship strategy focuses on responsible organizational behavior. Although one element of responsibility involves keeping promises made to
stakeholders, it also focuses on achieving high standards of organizational management and decision making among its leadership team. These practices have been found to hold true for professional athletics. Roy and Graeff (2003) found that stronger bonds between sports teams and their fans were created when the team was involved in community-building behaviors. Socially responsible behavior is frequently spread throughout a team’s fan base with the aid of social media (Boyle & Haynes, 2002). Fans expressed higher feelings of loyalty to a sports team not only when its management interacted responsibly with the fans but also when management interacted with athletes (Depken, 2001).

The third element of stewardship, reporting, provides organizations with multiple opportunities to share information. Tapp and Clowes (2002) note that it is the consumption of information from sports teams that helps distinguish the fan from the casual spectator. Fans are likely to spend a significant amount of time searching for information. Organizational openness about the sports team demonstrates a strong commitment to maintaining long-term relationships (Wakefield, 2007). Internet communication and, particularly, social-media aid in disseminating information about a sports team, and many fans have come together on blogs and forums to discuss official and unofficial news concerning the teams they support (Benigni et al., 2009).

Sports fans ultimately are critical for organizational success, and extra efforts must be taken to ensure that these relationships are cultivated carefully and consistently. The final stewardship dimension allows the organization to focus on relationship nurturing. Actions based on decisions that positively affect the organization and its stakeholders are the goal of mutually beneficial relationships (Bale, 2000). Ultimately, this strategy may not prescribe specific behaviors as the first three stewardship components do, but they encourage the dominant coalition to keep the public at the forefront of the organization’s mind when decisions are made. Tainsky and Stodolska (2010) reiterate the importance of keeping the entire fan base in mind when making decisions, not just the local community, because the increasing availability of information about teams online and through satellite broadcasts is resulting in the expansion of fan bases far beyond traditional geographic boundaries.

Stewardship has been shown to have a direct impact on the quality of relationships with a nonprofit organization’s donors (Waters, 2009). Although stewardship strategies have not been widely researched in domains other than fundraising, Kelly’s (2001) conceptualization highlights their applicability to all public relations specializations. Discussions of the four concepts echo throughout public relations literature, but they have yet to be measured in many areas outside of fundraising. The first research question pushes the discipline’s understanding of stewardship by examining the role the strategies play in helping create fandom:

RQ1: To what extent do NFL teams build relationships with their fans online using Kelly’s (2001) stewardship strategies?

Web 1.0 Versus Web 2.0

The rapid growth and use of Web 2.0 technologies was largely fueled by information exchanges, conversations, and sharing of digital files by individuals. Corporate
expansion into social-media applications was not always welcome by individuals using the services (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), and scholars and practitioners have questioned the strong emphasis that consultants have placed on incorporating social media in the communication toolbox, given the lack of measurable return on investment (Hearn et al., 2009).

However, those in the public relations field have rarely been able to demonstrate a calculable return on investment for its efforts despite increased attempts to demonstrate the field’s value (Grunig, 2006). More important, critics have raised concerns over how organizations are able to present content through social media, in particular social-networking sites. Mulhern (2009) explores the challenges that arise in transitioning from traditional and organizational channels, where practitioners retain a great amount of control over the content and design of organizational messages, to social media, where messages are constantly changing and being shaped by those outside the organization. Others have noted that social media restrict what organizations can do online because they no longer have freedom to create dedicated sections of a Web site for particular audiences or use strategies to appeal directly to those audiences (Barnes & Mattson, 2009); instead, social media act as an institutional equalizer, forcing all organizations to use similar format and design with their social-networking-site profiles (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Although practitioners can present organizational messages on their social-networking sites and share information through posted notes and hyperlinks, these messages are often short-lived and items may be overlooked on supporters’ news feeds. In addition, research has shown that individuals rarely return to fan pages or groups that they may have joined, so establishing an effective communication venue can be quite difficult (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Pitta and Fowler (2005) note that social media are often rife with taunts and criticism from supporters of other organizations, including sports teams, which could further reduce the efficacy of an organization’s social-media efforts. Given this growing skepticism of organizations’ social-media efforts, the second research question was created to compare NFL teams’ online communication efforts:

RQ2: Do NFL teams use their own Web sites and their official Facebook pages in similar proportions to foster relationship growth with their fans?

Method

To evaluate how NFL teams used stewardship on their Web sites and official Facebook pages to create fandom, we conducted a content analysis during a 1-week span in March 2010. At the time of data collection, the NFL had 32 teams. All 32 teams had a Facebook presence, but only 26 had official Facebook pages managed by the teams’ communication departments. The remaining six teams had pages that were run by fans. We decided to solely compare the official Facebook pages and the teams’ corresponding Web sites rather than introduce teams that were not present on both venues to eliminate the possibility of inflated percentages for stewardship inclusion on the organizations’ Web sites.

Given the lack of an established content-analysis coding scheme, we had to devise a coding strategy. After reviewing literature on relationship
building and stewardship, we created a list of specific behaviors designed to reflect behavior and communication efforts underlying the four dimensions. We sent this list of strategies to three public relations scholars and four public relations directors for professional sports teams for review. Their suggestions were taken into consideration when we created a comprehensive code book for the content-analysis project. The codebook was created so that measurement would focus exclusively on a specific team and not the NFL organization as a whole.

Each stewardship strategy was defined in the codebook, and the analysis consisted of examinations to determine whether the individual items were present on the teams’ official Facebook pages or Web sites. Coding for reciprocity included specific references to organizational partners and stakeholder groups, special promotions for specific groups, and fan-appreciation days. Responsibility coding addressed responsible organizational behavior including providing information on fan courtesy services, community relations information, information on special-needs services, the team’s vision or goals, and a site map or search engine specific to the organization’s material (e.g., not Facebook’s default search function) to aid in finding information. In addition, this dimension included provision of contact information for a team’s home stadium, the general office, and specific offices. Analysis of reporting covered team openness including online newsroom or news releases, the ability to subscribe to receive e-mail updates, and announcements on players’ positive and negative behaviors. Reporting also referenced disclosure of financial documentations, stadium financing, and official statements concerning payroll, environmental efforts, and the team’s roster and recruiting. This dimension also measured whether teams provided the upcoming schedule on the sites and whether they promoted signing up for RSS feeds on the site to keep fans informed of additions to it. Relationship-nurturing coding was conceptualized to focus on interactivity designed to keep fans closely involved with the team. Facebook pages and Web sites were coded for the ability to provide feedback and request information, sharing of pictures and videos, message-board interactivity, and presence of links to team social-media sites. In addition, the concept was operationalized to include whether individuals were encouraged to either create a personalized account on the teams’ Web sites or become fans of the Facebook pages directly by those managing the account (e.g., not the automatic “Become a Fan” messages generated by Facebook). Although it was not originally listed in our conceptualization of relationship nurturing, scholars suggested adding the ability to purchase team clothing and memorabilia because it indicates engagement not discussed in the other three stewardship strategies.

Items representing the four stewardship strategies are presented in Table 1. After a 90-minute training session, the research team coded official Facebook pages and Web sites of 10 Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. Given the low number of NFL teams that were active on both Internet platforms, it was necessary to use a similar population for the coding done for intercoder reliability tests. The three researchers coding the MLB teams achieved reliable results for intercoder reliability using Scott’s $\pi$ for all four stewardship strategies: reciprocity ($\pi = .91$), reporting ($\pi = .93$), responsibility ($\pi = .88$), and relationship nurturing ($\pi = .86$).
Table 1  Comparisons of Stewardship Efforts on NFL Teams’ Web Sites and Official Facebook Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Team’s official Web site ($n = 26$)</th>
<th>Team’s official Facebook page ($n = 26$)</th>
<th>Combined Internet total ($N = 52$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mention partnerships</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mention stakeholders</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>info on special promotions</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fan-appreciation days</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fan courtesy services</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff directory</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contact info for staff/departments</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general contact info for team</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stadium contact info</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special needs information</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community relations info</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>team’s philosophy/vision</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>search engine or site map</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>upcoming schedule</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>recruitment, team roster info</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal conduct policy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>online newsroom</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>audited financial documents</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>e-mail updates</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>RSS feeds</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>organizational publications</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<td>payroll information</td>
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<tr>
<td>stadium financing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>player behavior</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environmental actions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship nurturing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>purchase apparel</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>feedback forms/link or e-mail</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>member of the site/become fan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>request information</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide pictures</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide videos</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chat with others</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>link to social media</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. NFL = National Football League. Data are presented in the form $M$ ($SD$) for the overall incorporation of the four stewardship strategies. The tallies beneath those measures reflect the number of Web sites, Facebook pages, or combined total of those outlets that used the particular strategy.*
Results

Of the 32 professional sports teams in the NFL, 26 have both an official Web site and an official page on Facebook. The other six teams have an official Web site but not a Facebook page that is maintained by the organization. Nearly all (n = 25) of the teams’ Web sites linked to their official Facebook pages to help build a virtual community around the team with their fans.

The study’s first research question sought to determine which stewardship strategies were incorporated in the teams’ online relationship-building efforts. To determine the extent to which the strategies were used, we used the process illustrated by Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) for calculating mean scores for dichotomous data, such as “present” or “not present.” This method consists of awarding 100 points to a Web site that uses a particular strategy and 0 points to a Web site that does not. Once the entire sample is coded, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated from summed totals. We acknowledge that this is not a routine method for evaluating this type of data; however, the study was modeled after other content-analysis projects that measured Web communication efforts by organizations. This analysis procedure did provide both an overview of the frequency of the specific stewardship strategies and an elementary analysis that revealed statistically significant differences.

Relationship nurturing (M ± SD, 74.3 ± 5.7) and reciprocity (70.19 ± 10.3) were the two strategies most often used by NFL teams to foster relationship growth with fans online. Responsibility (47.0 ± 12.4) and reporting (41.3 ± 16.3) were used modestly by less than half of the organizations across the two Internet platforms. As shown in Table 1, an interesting pattern emerged: The teams’ official Web sites were used to incorporate all four stewardship strategies more often than their official Facebook pages. The greatest difference was for responsibility (t = 5.09, df = 50, p < .001); however, statistically significant results emerged for reciprocity (t = 4.42, df = 50, p < .001), reporting (t = 4.83, df = 50, p < .001), and relationship nurturing (t = 2.17, df = 50, p = .035).

Although these statistically significantly different mean scores help answer the second research question by showing that the NFL teams’ Web sites are used more for relationship-building purposes than their Facebook pages, we felt that examining the individual measures of the four stewardship strategies might reveal insights into how relationship cultivation may vary between the two sites. For reciprocity, the greatest difference was found for mentioning partnerships (χ² = 18.84, df = 1, p < .001). Five different partnerships were found to be promoted on Web sites and Facebook pages: community nonprofits that were not child-oriented (n = 32), child-oriented nonprofits (n = 28), for-profit companies (n = 25), government agencies (n = 5), and media conglomerates (n = 1). The next measure that varied the most between the two sites focused on special fan promotions, which were detailed more often on the teams’ Web sites (χ² = 8.09, df = 1, p = .004). Fan-appreciation days (χ² = 4.95, df = 1, p = .026) and recognition of specific stakeholder groups (χ² = 4.13, df = 1, p = .042) were also found to be more common on the teams’ Web sites. The teams recognized a variety of different stakeholder groups beyond the general label of fans (n = 41); these included the community (n = 40), customers who were not season-ticket holders (n = 27), season-ticket holders (n = 32), media (n = 36), employees (n = 18), and local school groups (n = 5).
For the responsibility construct, proportional inclusion of the individual measures was statistically significantly different, with the exception of informing fans what the team’s vision or goals were ($\chi^2 = 0.13$, $df = 1$, $p = .714$). For the other eight items, the teams’ Web sites included these specific responsibility strategies more than the teams’ Facebook pages. Fans who had questions or comments were more likely to find general team contact information ($\chi^2 = 7.69$, $df = 1$, $p = .005$), specific department contact information ($\chi^2 = 4.33$, $df = 1$, $p = .037$), and a listing of staff ($\chi^2 = 33.97$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) on the Web sites. Likewise, they were more likely to find stadium contact information and addresses ($\chi^2 = 11.35$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) on the teams’ Web sites. For fans looking to find specific information, NFL teams were more likely to provide a search engine or site map on their own Web site than to create one specific to their Facebook pages ($\chi^2 = 7.92$, $df = 1$, $p = .005$). The teams’ own Web sites were also more likely to convey information on community relations programming ($\chi^2 = 15.6$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); information for fans with special needs, such as handicapped parking, dietary restrictions, assistive listening, and service animals ($\chi^2 = 19.69$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); and information on fan courtesy services ($\chi^2 = 15.17$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The Web sites and Facebook pages that mentioned courtesy services provided a variety of information ranging from designated driver programs ($n = 12$), parking shuttles ($n = 9$), passenger drop-off areas ($n = 3$), and parking lot automobile assistance ($n = 2$) to first-aid stations ($n = 4$), family restrooms and changing areas ($n = 3$), fan service booths ($n = 2$), and children’s identification bracelets ($n = 1$).

For the reporting strategy, statistics could not be calculated for two items, audited financial statements and payroll information, because this information was not made available on either Internet platform. One other item, provision of information on positive and negative player behavior, was not statistically significantly different; both sites shared information in similar proportion ($\chi^2 = 0.31$, $df = 1$, $p = .578$) even though official personnel-conduct policies were never discussed on Facebook ($\chi^2 = 6.78$, $df = 1$, $p = .009$). For the other eight items, the teams’ Web sites were used more often than their Facebook pages to provide information to fans about their upcoming schedules ($\chi^2 = 10.88$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), the teams’ rosters and player statistics ($\chi^2 = 12.38$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and the details of stadium financing ($\chi^2 = 8.09$, $df = 1$, $p = .004$). The Web sites were also more likely to offer the ability to sign up for e-mail updates for new information ($\chi^2 = 13.18$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) and to highlight the ability to sign up for RSS feeds to receive automatic notices when the site changed ($\chi^2 = 11.08$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Finally, the Web sites were more likely to provide statements of the teams’ environmentally friendly activities such as reducing their environmental impact and carbon footprint ($\chi^2 = 6.58$, $df = 1$, $p = .010$). Information was often shared in online newsrooms ($\chi^2 = 17.69$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) and downloadable organization publications ($\chi^2 = 17.69$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), which were both more common on the teams’ Web sites. The publications that the teams shared consisted of official statements ($n = 33$), news releases ($n = 31$), newsletters ($n = 24$), fact sheets ($n = 13$), free media guides ($n = 4$), annual reports ($n = 2$), and the text of speeches from organizational leaders ($n = 1$).

In regard to the relationship-nurturing strategy, there were three items that were found to be incorporated on both the teams’ Web sites and their Facebook pages in similar proportion: fans’ ability to submit pictures ($\chi^2 = 1.49$, $df = 1$, $p = .223$), fans’ ability to submit videos ($\chi^2 = 1.99$, $df = 1$, $p = .158$), and the ability to chat
with others ($\chi^2 = 3.01$, $df = 1$, $p = .082$). The teams’ Web sites were more likely to allow the fans to provide feedback ($\chi^2 = 5.78$, $df = 1$, $p = .016$), request specific information ($\chi^2 = 17.69$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and purchase apparel and memorabilia ($\chi^2 = 14.02$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The Web sites were also more likely to link to other social-media accounts than the teams’ Facebook pages ($\chi^2 = 14.08$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Nearly all the Web sites ($n = 25$) linked to the team’s Facebook page. The other social-media applications that were most frequently linked to across both Internet platforms were Twitter ($n = 33$), team blogs ($n = 25$), podcasts ($n = 7$), Flickr ($n = 3$), and YouTube ($n = 2$).

Across all four stewardship strategies, the only item for which Facebook outperformed the teams’ Web sites was the relationship-nurturing component of specifically asking people to become members of the Web site or fans of the Facebook page ($\chi^2 = 5.32$, $df = 1$, $p = .021$). Because Facebook automatically encourages visitors to organization pages, this construct required the team to state that they wanted people to become members of the site or fans on the Facebook page. The results show that the organizations actively sought to get individuals to become fans of their Facebook pages more than to join their Web sites, which were more focused on relationship-cultivation efforts.

**Discussion**

This study found that NFL teams were actively using stewardship to cultivate fandom among their online communities; however, significantly greater emphasis was being placed on relationship growth on the teams’ own Web sites than on their official Facebook pages. The mean scores of the inclusion of all four stewardship variables were statistically significantly greater for the Web sites than for Facebook. However, this undermines how vastly differently the teams’ public relations practitioners use the two Internet outlets. Of the specific strategies listed in Table 1, five were found to be used in similar proportion on both the organizations’ Web sites and Facebook pages; only one strategy was found to be used more often on the teams’ Facebook pages. The other 27 items were found to be used on the teams’ Web sites in statistically significantly greater proportions than on Facebook.

Simply comparing these results with the advice of consultants and public relations agencies that tout the importance of social media for developing relationships with stakeholders would leave one wondering why the NFL is taking a more difficult path to cultivate relationships with fans. Nonetheless, the findings of the current study may offer important insights that can be used to reveal a deeper level of understanding of the role Internet communication plays with fans.

Sports fans actively seek and consume information about their favorite teams and players. Whereas most consultants stress that individuals rarely visit organizational Web sites unless directed there by search engines (Christ, 2007; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Pavlik, 2007), the dedication and loyalty exhibited by sports fans far exceeds that of the general public for almost every other type of organization (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Sports fans frequently visit their favorite teams’ Web sites (Woo, An, & Cho, 2008) and view the Web sites as more trusted and reliable than other communication channels (Phua, 2010). Traditional media are devising strategies to capture sports fans’ attention, given a growth in the number of fans going
directly to the teams’ Web sites for the latest news and information concerning the teams’ on- and off-field activities (Butler & Sagas, 2008).

Given the significance that sports fans find in receiving information directly from the source, the public relations practitioners behind the teams’ Internet presence are wise for using their own Web sites for relationship-building purposes more than the social-networking sites. After a tidal wave of consultants and public relations agencies pushing social-media use on their clients, scholars have begun speaking out against the blind adoption of social media for communication endeavors (Constantinides et al., 2009). Specifically, questions have been raised as to whether organizations are truly cultivating meaningful relationships with stakeholders by using templates handed down from social-media sites (Mulhern, 2009). When an NFL team’s Facebook page appears essentially the same as that of the American Red Cross or the Internal Revenue Service, is that page fulfilling the wants and needs of the team’s fans?

No doubt an organization can foster relationships on its Facebook page, but Mulhern (2009) questions whether this is a fulfilling experience for those outside the organization. Facebook pages have not drawn significant interaction between organizations and stakeholders (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Waters et al., 2009), but even if they were able to draw audiences that used the pages frequently, nothing would prevent organizational messages from being lost or overlooked. The lack of control over a Facebook page has kept organizations from using the service (Constantinides et al., 2009). In addition, the frequent changes that Facebook has implemented over the past 5 years have wreaked havoc on the plans organizations had for communicating on the site. These changes include not only the change from groups to official fan pages but also the reorganization of the site, and loosening of the site’s default privacy and activity settings could present new challenges that public relations practitioners had not anticipated when devising their Facebook strategies.

Lack of control over social-media outlets has also been connected to jeers and insults from opponents and competitors (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). Bearing in mind Greenpeace’s virtual assault and takeover of Nestlé’s Facebook page in April 2010, NFL teams may be weary of focusing too much effort on social-networking sites because they do not retain full control over the sites. Although they do have the ability to manually remove offensive postings or comments designed to denigrate a team, its players, or its management, managers of corporate social-media accounts do not have the ability or power to block individual users’ accounts. Those powers lie in the hands of the third-party social-networking site, whereas online forums and interactive elements of the teams’ own Web sites are under complete control of the team employees managing the Web site. This shift in power keeps online forums and other areas prone to visitor comments more positive in nature (Pitta & Fowler, 2005).

Perhaps the biggest reason that NFL teams are promoting relationships on their own Web sites rather than through social-media outlets is the lack of a measurable return on investment for most Web 2.0 technologies. Hearn et al. (2009) suggested that social-media applications may prove to be beneficial in the future, but consultants have yet to demonstrate that the engagement and interactivity on these sites benefit an organization’s bottom line. There have been several studies that have noted that the lack of a calculable return on investment will limit the numbers of
practitioners pushing their organizations to develop a more proactive social-media presence (Toledano, 2010; Valos, Ewing, & Powell, 2010).

The lack of a demonstrable return on investment, along with growing apathy toward organizations using social media (Vorvoreanu, 2009), helps explain why NFL teams may be placing a stronger emphasis on creating fandom on their own personal Web sites rather than Facebook. These findings counter the suggestions of consultants, but they also run counter to those of previous scholarly inquiries into online engagement with external stakeholders. The NFL teams examined in this study were found to use relationship-building efforts in significantly greater proportion than nonprofit organizations (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Waters et al., 2009) and corporate organizations (e.g., Cho & Huh, 2010; Ki & Hon, 2006).

The current study found that relationship-cultivation endeavors were being used in greater proportions across all four stewardship strategies than for most other types of organizations. Even for responsibility and reporting—the two stewardship strategies with the lowest scores—the modest mean scores were primarily a result of a few single items that were rarely, if ever, used by the teams, rather than an across-the-board resistance of the entire dimension. Public relations and marketing practitioners would be wise to examine how NFL teams foster relationship growth among their fans because their efforts have helped the NFL thrive with an expanding audience and growing feelings of fandom (Anderson, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Stewardship has been promoted by public relations scholars as a practical demonstration of how relationship-building efforts can be included in everyday communication practices (Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2009). Although previous studies of stewardship have focused on offline behaviors, the current study consulted senior public relations scholars and current practitioners in professional sports communication to devise a scheme that would enable assessing stewardship behaviors across multiple Internet platforms. The results demonstrated that NFL teams use stewardship strategies more than nonprofits and other for-profits to cultivate relationships with their fans, but even more revealing, the teams’ Web sites were used significantly more often than their organizations’ official Facebook pages for these efforts. Although we used existing literature to help explain the different proportions and the dominance of traditional Web sites over social media, several limitations need to be examined before drawing final conclusions from the study.

**Limitations**

One of the study’s first shortcomings that must be acknowledged was that the examined sample was limited in that it only looked at teams from the NFL, and even that sample was not the entire population. Although it furthers the notion that the public relations practitioners for NFL teams question the role of Facebook, six of the NFL teams did not have an official Facebook page in March 2010. Perhaps these organizations were in the process of creating a presence on the site to foster more relationship growth. Fandom is not limited solely to the NFL. Examining how, or if, MLB, National Hockey League, and National Basketball Association teams use Facebook would reveal insights on a level that the current study was unable
to do. Another limitation of the study was that there were no established, reliable measures of stewardship for Internet communication. Although expert advice was sought to develop new scales, it might be helpful to use established scales, such as Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogic principles, to understand organizational relationship building from another perspective.

**Future Research**

In addition to the studies proposed to help address the limitations of the current study, the findings raise some intriguing questions that need to be addressed. For example, NFL teams that have a regional or national fan base may use the Internet very differently than smaller teams such as those in the Arena Football League. These smaller, locally based teams may use Facebook for relationship cultivation because they lack the resources of NFL teams to invest in extensive development of their own Web sites. A similar comparison could be made between MLB teams and their minor-league affiliates. In addition, it would be helpful to analyze sports teams against other organization types. Although this study found that NFL teams use stewardship in greater proportion than did other published studies on non-profits and for-profit corporations, it would be helpful to analyze them all in one study under the same criteria to determine whether NFL teams really do have a greater understanding of how to cultivate relationships with external stakeholders. Ultimately, however, content analysis does pose a methodological flaw for these proposed studies. Although it reveals how the sites are being used to foster relationship growth, it does not measure the underlying motivations that practitioners have for using them. Understanding strategic communicators’ attitudes toward the relationship-building efforts on the teams’ Web sites compared with social-media applications may provide more insights into why NFL teams, other sports teams, and other organizations use the Internet to communicate the way they do. With that knowledge, scholars and practitioners alike can reach sound conclusions on how the Internet can be used to create lasting, mutually beneficial relationships for organizations and their supporters.

**References**


