How Marketing Professionals Use and Staff Social Media in Entertainment and Event Venues

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Abstract

This paper reviews the results of a recent survey of entertainment and event venue marketing professionals. The survey was emailed to 890 venue professionals. There were 74 unique venue marketing professionals who responded (8.3% response rate) and answered most of the 55 questions covering various topics about the use, staffing, and perceptions of social media. The insights from this paper should assist entertainment and event venue professionals in comparing their priorities when it comes to social media use. The findings will also be helpful to anyone who might be responsible for the marketing of an artist or concert by shedding light on the benefit of integrating social media efforts with the venue or promoter. In addition, educators in the music and entertainment industry should benefit from an increased awareness of the strategic use of social media and shed light on the opportunities to prepare students for jobs in this area.

Keywords: social media, venue staffing, event venue, entertainment venue, IAVM, International Association of Venue Managers, arena, stadium, performing arts, PAC, theatre

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to uncover how social media is used, staffed, and perceived by entertainment and event venue (EEV) marketing professionals. While there has been much written about the pervasiveness of social media in our culture, and there is scattered evidence of companies, politicians, and charitable organizations reaping the benefits of social media, not much is known about how venue professionals use and manage social media to market their facilities, events, and gatherings within them.

Ultimately, this paper reveals how social media is administered and perceived among marketing professionals of various types of facilities in

the United States, including arenas, stadiums, performing arts centers, and convention centers. It begins by discussing the pressures faced by venues as they are called upon to not only rent their facilities, but to also promote and co-promote concerts and events in a competitive and uncertain environment. Social media is then defined and suggested as an alternative to traditional marketing strategies due to its growth among consumers and effectiveness in some businesses. After reporting the methods and results of a survey of seventy-four venue marketing professionals, the paper concludes by discussing the main findings and implications for venue marketing professionals.

Venues Under Pressure

Effective marketing is no longer an option for entertainment and event venues (EEVs); it's a necessity. According to the 2019 PwC report, *Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2019-2023*, marketers will need to continuously build the capabilities to compete in an increasingly personalized world. "As complex as marketing already is, it's going to become the domain of multi-competency professionals who are fluent in dealing with new types of platforms such as live events, apps and e-commerce, Internet search and voice, and in courting influencers" (Van Eeden and Chow 2019, 18).

At the same time, venues are taking on the role and associated risks of promoting or co-promoting events. And, according to industry experts, the world's largest booking agencies are looking for (and leaning toward) venues with a highly competent staff to fulfill an integrated marketing strategy that includes the resources of the talent, the promoter, *and* the venue (Baskerville 2016; Waddell 2007, 46). Add to this the growing pressure coming from taxpayers and politicians looking for effective stewardship of publicly subsidized venues and we see the need for EEVs to take seriously their role in marketing their venues and the events and gatherings within them (Mahoney et al. 2015).

Some venues benefit from the good will—and good marketing—provided by professional franchises serving as anchor tenants, and by a professional league spending millions of dollars on marketing to bring awareness to the league, team, and venue. While such an arrangement is beneficial, only 31 NFL stadiums, 30 Major League Baseball franchises, and 57 arenas host major professional sports teams (e.g., NBA, WNBA, NHL, AFL, MISL); the remaining venues, including small market venues

and performing arts centers, don't benefit from league marketing. Nevertheless, these venues have to fill available dates with concerts, events, and gatherings to offset debt and overhead—quite a challenge given the current state of the live entertainment industry where venues are often sharing the financial risk associated with high performance guarantees, sharing food and beverage revenue with promoters, and fighting the insurgence of ticketing fraud. At the same time, venues are often bearing the increased costs of safety and security measures. And, when shows are cancelled, or ticket sales are soft, venues are losing out on much needed rental income, concession fees, and ticket fees.

Promoters, and partnering venues, may be tempted to shore up their financial situation by allocating significant resources to familiar traditional mass marketing strategies to boost the image of the venue, or ticket sales. However, the high cost and uncertain returns associated with television advertising, print ads, billboard, and radio spots are not suited for an environment with increased pressures, shrinking marketing budgets, and new customer expectations (Rothschild, Stielstra, and Wysong 2007).

While social media can't be expected to be the sole solution for challenges facing the live entertainment and events industry, its proper use and management may be uniquely suited to reach ticket buyers and event promoters using the power of "online word-of-mouth."

Social Media Defined

In fact, some have attempted to explain and study social media as a type of online word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, comparing its influence on consumer attitudes to that of offline WOM (Smironva et al. 2019; Lee and Youn 2009; Prendergast and Ko 2010; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009).

Others, like Kaplan and Haenlein (2009, 61) described a "general" definition of social media as a "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." Web 2.0, they explain, refers to web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration. Kaplan and Haenlein go on to provide a helpful classification system for different types of social media, including blogs and microblogs like Twitter, social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, and content communities like YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest. This classification

rubric is based on a set of theories related to social presence (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976), media richness (Daft and Lengel 1986), and self-presentation and self-disclosure (Goffman 1959).

Social media can take many different forms, including internet forums, weblogs, blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, rating, and social bookmarking. Of interest to this study are some of the most popular applications being used by venues that allow groups to create user generated content (UCG) and engage in peer-to-peer conversations and exchange of content (examples are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.).

So far, we've discussed the challenges EEVs face to compete in an uncertain environment, and we've defined social media. While we have plenty of anecdotal evidence of organizations and events successfully utilizing social media, we have little objective data that tells us what entertainment and event venue marketing professionals think about social media, or how they use it to "build the capabilities to compete effectively."

We now turn our attention to the methods and results of a 2018 social media survey in which seventy-four venue marketing professionals reveal their perceptions and predictions related to social media use in entertainment and event venues.

Methods and Results

In mid-2018, an online survey was emailed to a database of active professional members of the International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM). IAVM is a U.S.-based international membership trade association (formerly called the International Association of Assembly Managers) with approximately 3,200 members. Membership is comprised of active members (professional venue staff), allied members (vendors), and faculty and students who participate in academic programs related to the field.

IAVM is described on its website (www.IAVM.org):

> Representing public assembly venues from around the globe, IAVM's active members include managers and senior executives from auditorium, arenas, convention centers, exhibit halls, stadiums, performing arts centers, university complexes, and amphitheaters. Member venues represent huge expenditures of public and private funds. They attract millions of patrons to an astonishing

variety of events from football to basketball, baseball to hockey, from rock concerts to conventions, conferences to ballets…the list is almost endless.

In an effort to target venue marketing professionals only, the membership list was purged and the survey was sent to only one member from each of the 890 venues in the IAVM database. The recipient of the email was asked to forward the survey to the person who had expertise and experience in marketing and social media on behalf of the venue. Students, faculty, and vendors were not surveyed.

Of 890 survey invitations to professional members of the IAVM, 74 individuals responded to the survey for a response rate of 8.3%, which compares favorably to other surveys of this audience. These respondents functioned at a high level of management with 31% indicating they were executives and 48% indicating they were at the manager level; 21% indicated they were operational level venue employees. 67% reported having five or more years of experience using strategic social media marketing.

Demographically, a little over half of the respondents were female (54%) and 46% were male. According to the 2018 Pew Research Center definitions of generations based on birth year, 19% were Boomers (born 1946-1964), 39% belonged to Generation X (born 1965-1980), and 42% defined themselves as Millennials (born 1981-1996).

Venue Types, Market Size, and Attributes

Venue types included: arenas/civic centers/auditoriums (45%), performing arts centers/theaters (32%), convention center/exhibition centers (14%), stadium, fairs, or amphitheaters (9%).

According to the respondents, just over half (51%) described the "market size" they operated in as a midsize market (area population 500,000-3 million). Small market venues (area population under 500,000) made up 32%, and large market venues (area population over 3 million) made up 17% of the respondents. As for location, 88% of the venues were in the United States, 9% were in Canada, and 3% were outside of North America.

The venues represented were further categorized by these attributes:
- 82% non-university venue vs. 18% university venue
- 46% publicly managed, 42% privately managed, 6% combination, 6% other

- 66% public-owned, 24% private-owned, 6% combination, 4% other
- 52% non-profit, 48% for-profit

Staffing of Social Media
Current and Future Plans to Staff Social Media

For venues, the social media effort is much more likely to be kept in-house. Only 8% of venue marketing professionals currently use an outside contractor for social media initiatives; 92% use an in-house marketing team. However, 22% of the venues have outsourced social media to an outside agency, consultant, or third-party in the past. Overwhelmingly, the creation and maintenance of social media in venues is the responsibility of the marketing department (74%). This is consistent with King Fish Media's (2010) study finding social media is a marketing responsibility in 70% of the companies it surveyed.

Staff-Up

About half (49%) of venues reported that in the last twelve months they either hired someone (27%) to enhance their social media efforts, reassigned someone (13%) to enhance social media efforts, or contracted with a vendor (9%) to enhance social media efforts. Another 17% of the venues have plans to "staff-up" (hire, reassign, or contract) their social media efforts in the next twelve months. Finally, 45% of venues reported they have not "staffed-up" in the last twelve months or have no plans to staff-up in the next twelve months. In summary, about half of the venues have staffed up social media efforts or have plans to do so, and the other half of the venues have not.

Interns or Not

Of the venues surveyed, 51% were non-profit. As a result, it may be more suitable for these venues to use interns and volunteers to do some of the social media work of posting, commenting, and monitoring social media. Across all venue types, 51% of venues did not use interns or volunteers to help with social media. 33% of venues reported using paid interns, 9% used non-paid interns, and only 1% used volunteers. When one considers the increased importance placed on maintaining an authentic voice when using social media, it should not be too surprising that just over half

of venues do not use interns or volunteers to enhance their social media efforts.

Perceptions of Social Media Strategy and Effectiveness
Social Media Strategy

When venue marketing professionals were asked if they felt like they had a well-defined social media strategy, 80% reported they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. 20% of the venue marketing professionals were uncertain, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement. When comparing the results from a similar question asked in a 2010 study of venues (Rothschild 2011), it's interesting to note venue marketing professionals feel better today about their social media strategy than they did in 2010, when only 57% percent of venue marketing professionals felt like they had a well-defined social media strategy. Even though social media platforms continue to evolve and change, it seems many venue marketing professionals are taking advantage of the increasing number of resources to learn how to manage their social media campaigns.

Social Media Effectiveness

When asked if social media had increased revenues, a whopping 73% reported they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Only 5% reported no increase in revenues. About 22% were neutral—perhaps suggesting they could not measure social media effectiveness. Another interesting comparison when asking the same question in 2010 (Rothschild 2011), only 38% of venue professionals reported increased revenues. In 2018, a full 35% more venue marketing professionals reported increased revenues as a result of using social media. It should be pointed out that venue marketing professionals still report difficulty in measuring return on investment of social media. About 58% of venue marketing professionals report they are not sure they can measure return on investment.

Reasons to Use Social Media

Exhibit 1 shows the two most important reasons reported for implementing a social media strategy. Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated they wanted to improve sales (Tickets, Rentals, Sponsorships, etc.). The second most important reason was to communicate with the public.

Improve sales (tickets, rentals, sponsorships, etc.)	92%
Communicate with the public	86%
Monitor conversation about us	59%
Manage customer service	56%
Increase lead gen	47%
My competitors are doing it	33%
Directive from management	15%
Other	2%
Total	100%*

Exhibit 1. Primary reasons for implementing a social media strategy. *More than one reason was allowed. Therefore, percentages add up to more than 100.

Predicting the Future Use of Social Media and other Marketing Tools
Facebook Still Rules

Exhibit 2 shows us the popularity of four social media platforms. When asked what is the single most important social media platform you use in your venue, Facebook claims the top spot with 85% of venue marketing professionals reporting it as the most important; all others are far behind. Twitter is the second most important with only 8% of respon-
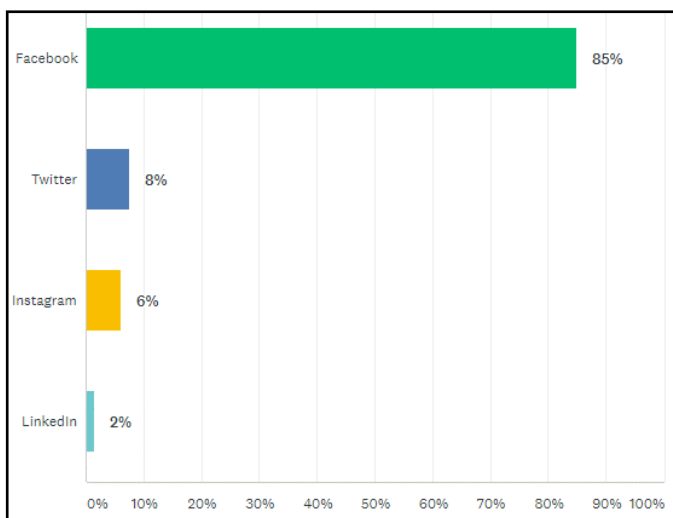

Exhibit 2. The single most important social media platform.

dents reporting it is the most important, followed by Instagram (6%) and LinkedIn (2%).

Paid versus Organic Social Media

In a recent survey of social media marketers from a variety of businesses (Social Media Marketing Report 2018), 52% reported a decline in organic post reach. Interestingly, only 38% of venue marketers reported a decline in organic reach when using Facebook. When it comes to paid social media, venue marketing professionals predict they will spend more money on social media in the next year. It appears Facebook and Instagram will get more of the marketing budget, while Snapchat and Pinterest will receive little, if any, spend.

Exhibits 3 and 4 give us further insight into the future use of social media, and its perceived importance to EEV marketing professionals. Exhibit 3 reveals the top two paid social media platforms that will be used in the near future. 91% of respondents plan on spending the same or more marketing dollars on Facebook ads. Instagram ads will receive second priority with 77% reporting they will spend the same or more in the
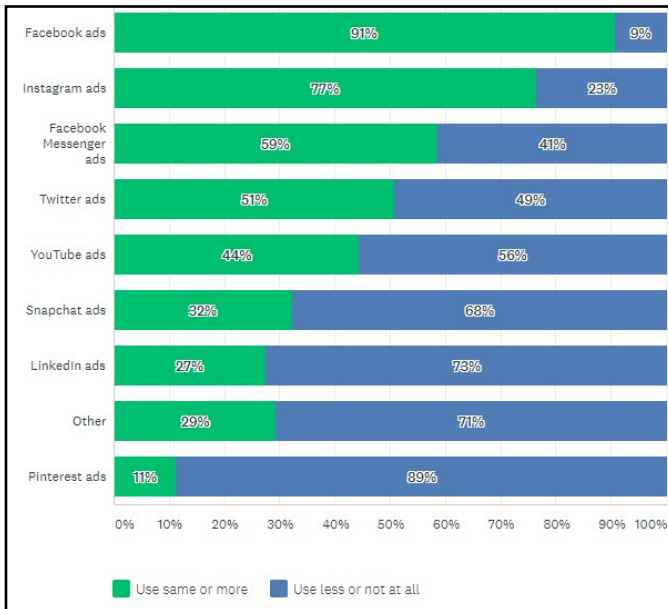

Exhibit 3. Forecasting how the use of paid social media will change in the future.

near future. At the time of this writing, Facebook Messenger advertising is just coming into its own. 66% of venue marketing professionals expect to spend the same or more in the near future. Finally, we turn our attention to those social media platforms which will receive fewer or no marketing dollars in the near future. 73% of venue marketers predict LinkedIn ads will be used less or not at all, and 89% of venue marketing professionals predict Pinterest ads will be used less or not at all in the future.

Exhibit 4 gives us a peek into the future use of non-traditional and traditional marketing tools. While most would agree traditional marketing tools like direct mail, TV, radio, print, and billboard have their purpose and utility, an overwhelming percentage of EEV marketing professionals (100%) forecast they will be using new media, including social media, web, email, and mobile, the same amount or more in the near future. A significant number of respondents (97%) also indicate that public relations will be used the same or more in the future when compared to traditional mass marketing tools such as TV, direct mail, billboards, and print ads.
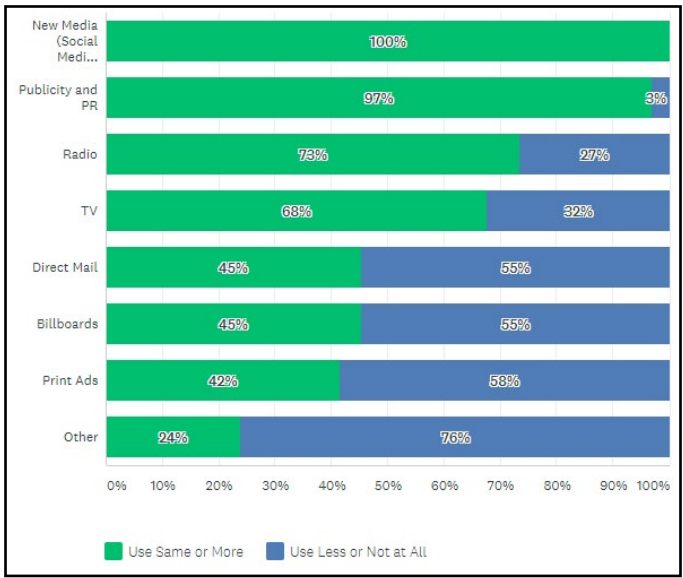

Exhibit 4. Forecasting use of traditional and non-traditional marketing tools.

Limitations and Future Research

While the 74 respondents are IAVM active members who are in venue management, they reasonably represent EEV marketing professionals in general, and these survey results may be generalized to other member IAVM venues. The survey was conducted online by email invitation. While using online media to deliver a survey related to the proliferation of various online activities was, at one time, questionable and potentially, a source of responder bias, the current level of saturation of email use by professionals mitigates these likely sources of responder bias and is not a source of additional concern with this study.

Future research should address differences among venue marketing professionals operating in countries other than the United States. In addition, future research should also address the effectiveness of social media marketing across venue types and various adoption levels. It will also be valuable to uncover just which social media applications will have the most success across different customer age groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the past, venues relied heavily on traditional marketing approaches to reach consumers, persuade them to buy tickets, and encourage word-of-mouth marketing. Traditional marketing methods, however, are dwindling in usefulness due to cost, expansive product choice, dispersed populations, myriad media outlets, and consumer resistance to advertising (Stielstra 2005). And since early 2015 there has been a "visible advantage in the focus on digital marketing and advertising over traditional channels" (Guttman 2019).

In general, marketers have been reducing their budgets for traditional advertising, while growth in expenses on digital marketing remained positive. Non-traditional digital marketing and advertising, however, is on the rise (Guttman 2019)—but not without its challenges. As early as 2010, Comscore explained, "Social networking and social media continue to drive much of the innovation occurring around the Internet. A critical challenge remains the ability to effectively harness the marketing intelligence inherent in the way people communicate and interact with one another through the digital medium and make it actionable" (ComScore, Inc. 2010, 15).

This survey found a significant number of venue marketing professionals are making strides to "effectively harness this marketing intelli-

gence" found in social media marketing efforts. In fact, most feel their social media efforts are resulting in increased revenues. Two-thirds or more of venue marketing professionals describe social media implementation as "constantly changing," "time consuming but necessary," but "useful and helpful." And a majority (56%) of venue marketing professionals describe social media as "invaluable to our business." And a smaller percentage (21%) perceived social media as being "complicated." While some of these descriptions can be viewed as negative, Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) point out the changing nature of social media and recommend having a good dose of humility when choosing to participate.

Venues are utilizing email newsletters and various types of social media to engage customers and prospects, but the most important seem to be Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These platforms are well suited to monitor the conversation about their venues. In fact, in addition to improving sales and communicating with the public, monitoring conversations was the third most reported reason for implementing a social media strategy. In a social media-centric world where conversations about brand are no longer controlled by corporate led PR campaigns, one can see the importance of monitoring what consumers are saying about the brand as part of their marketing mix (Mangold and Faulds 2009).

We find managing social media is not without its challenges either. Venue marketing professionals report the most significant impediment to implementing a social media strategy is not having enough staff to manage it. While 89% of venues have an in-house marketing department, almost 60% of those departments contain only one or two full-time equivalent staff. Making it even more difficult, almost half are not in the process of hiring or reassigning current staff to enhance their social media efforts. While a notable proportion of venues do use interns or volunteers (49%) to enhance their social media efforts, slightly more venues do not (51%). There is considerable debate on this topic (Westerman 2010), but most agree "handing over the keys" of social media to interns is risky without an established social media strategy and effective training. If venue marketing professionals are to remain strategic with their social media, they'll need to address staffing needs to ensure maximum return on investment. This begins with measuring social media activity and the results of that activity—higher levels of engagement, more ticket sales, and more conversations, to name a few.

Venue marketing professionals are familiar with the power and influence of their customers. Patrons, fans, and conference-goers tend to seek out and organize around common interests—a sporting event, a concert, or a professional meeting. For "superstar" acts and popular sport franchises, fans are often quick to purchase. But when a lesser-known talent, performance, or team is booked in a venue, filling seats turns into a greater challenge. In the venue industry, success often begets success. A venue known for successful operations and effective marketing can improve its notoriety among the small fraternity of meeting planners, promoters, and booking agents looking for available space.

Because entertainment and event enthusiasts will continue to search for information and share opinions in the social media space, venue marketing professionals must be sure their social media strategy includes being proactive in the creation of content worthy of discussion and responsive to the conversations that arise naturally from positive or negative experiences. Venue marketing professionals should do what they can to enhance the marketing efforts of anchor tenants, promoters, artists, and any other stakeholder having a vested interest in the success of a show, event, or meeting. While implementing a social media strategy doesn't guarantee success, it provides the best opportunity for meeting the challenge set forth by Comscore—to harness the marketing intelligence inherent when people are being social.

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The *Journal of the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association* (the *MEIEA Journal*) is published annually by MEIEA in order to increase public awareness of the music and entertainment industry and to foster music and entertainment business research and education.

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