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Kara Heater

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Social Media is Bananas: The effect social media has on rebranding and customer attraction and retention

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Marketing Department of the Parker College of Business.

By

Kara Heater

Under the mentorship of Dr. Trey Denton.

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate whether social media had an impact on the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas baseball team. The study also focuses on the impact social media has had on the attraction and retention of customers. Interviews were conducted with full time staff members and customers of the Savannah Bananas. An online survey was distributed through social media to learn more about the connection between customers and the Bananas social media. The results of the study suggest that social media has had a positive affect on both the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas and the attraction and retention of customers.

Thesis Mentor: _____

Dr. Trey Denton

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Introduction

Social media has become a central talking point in today's conversations. Being used for both personal and professional use, it has woven its way in to becoming an influential part in society and marketing. Many businesses have begun to use social media because it allows companies to market in a new way and expand their reach to bigger audiences and potential customers. It also allows companies to talk to their customers and enables customers to talk to one another (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This gives the customers a chance to engage and stay connected with the business. The evolving methods of communication between businesses and customers have made an impressive mark on marketing today. With smart phones in the hands of nearly 80% of Americans, communication, particularly through social media platforms, has become extremely simple and efficient.

Today, news and information spreads like rapid fire on social media and users are quick to express their opinion on current topics. Although, both positive and negative posts create engagement on platforms, there are times when customer engagement may jump from high to low. This is based on how much and what kind of content is being posted. Social media platforms allow companies to see what time their followers are most active. Customer engagement can range depending on what time content is posted. For example, rebranding any business can create possible issues with customer engagement on social media. The reasoning behind a rebranding according to Stuart and Muzellec (2004) is "to send a signal to the marketplace, communication to stakeholders that something about the organization has changed". Both minor and major changes can be

made in order for an organization to be labeled as rebranded. This research will look at the rebranding of a baseball team.

The Savannah Bananas, a collegiate summer league located in Savannah, GA, debuted in 2016 and replaced a former minor league team, the Savannah Sand Gnats, who relocated after the 2015 season. The “rebrand” included a completely new league, owners, staff, and name. Although the term “rebrand” typically means the same organization is making changes to their company, for the purpose of this research, this is not included. It is important to note that the previous team that occupied Savannah’s baseball stadium, the Sand Gnats, has no affiliation with the Savannah Bananas. However, this is still an example of rebranding because fans still think of it as a change to baseball in Savannah.

The primary purpose of this paper is to determine how social media impacted the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas baseball team. Next, we will investigate how social media has impacted the attraction and retention of customers. This research highlights the impact of social media use for sports teams and their organizations as well as the influence it has had on customer engagement.

Literature Review

The literature review summarizes several studies and relevant research to provide more in-depth knowledge of social media and marketing. It also further defines rebranding and the impact it has on organizations and sports teams.

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube are among the most popular social media platforms among customers. Social media has brought new opportunities and ways for businesses and customers to interact. The purpose of social media is to provide a place of social interaction through online communities, to generate content and to network with others (Hajli, 2014). These platforms are used for both personal use, such as sharing and updating one's friends and family, and professional use. For professional use, Hajli (2014) determined the different benefits social media offers to businesses: enhanced brand popularity, facilitating word-of-mouth communication, increasing sales, sharing information in a business context and generating support online for customers. But these benefits are difficult to obtain without the key component of social media marketing which is generating customer involvement (Do-Hyung *et al.* 2007).

Rebranding

There are multiple variations of rebranding and it can range from minor to major changes throughout a business. Minor changes including "limited improvements to the visual identity of the brand, including the logo, slogan or imagery" and major changes involving "the formation of a new name or shift in business philosophies" (Agha,

Goldman & Dixon, 2016). In this study, we define rebranding as the change from one baseball organization to a completely new baseball organization. With the old team, the Sand Gnats, relocating, the city of Savannah and the stadium experienced both minor and major rebranding changes for the new baseball team. Through a rebranding, the new organization's goal is to become a stronger brand or company and increase sales and profits. In sports in particular, the biggest challenge in the rebranding of a team is replacing customer judgements of the former team with a brand-new association of the new team (Ballouli, Grady & Stewart, 2015). One of the most impactful parts of a rebrand is changing the brand name. Based on Agha, Goldman & Dixon's (2016) research, there are four criteria for a good brand name including: easy to say, tangible, helps the team's positioning, and has a positive connotation. When an organization chooses a new brand name, they are trying to stray from the associations of the previous name to create positive associations with the new brand.

Attraction & Retention

Attraction is something that can provoke an interest while retention is a continued interest to something. Without creating an attraction or being able to continue to satisfy your customer, a company will never create the sales and profits they potentially could. The way a company chooses to brand itself can impact the attraction and retention of customers. Branding "is often used to differentiate products and companies in order to build economic value for both the consumer and the company" (Sokro, 2012). To increase branding on social media, companies are creating content that hopefully provokes interest in their current or potential customers.

History of the Savannah Bananas

The Savannah Sand Gnats, an affiliate minor league team of the New York Mets, relocated in 2015 to Columbia, South Carolina and became the Columbia Fireflies. The team had low attendance and requested from the city of Savannah a brand new ballpark and facilities. When the city revealed they had no plans to build a new park, the Sand Gnats made the decision to leave the city and relocate. Jesse and Emily Cole, owners of the Gastonia Grizzlies, a team in the summer collegiate Coastal Plain League, recognized the opportunity to bring baseball back to Savannah and began making plans to bring a new team to the city.

The Bananas inaugural season was in 2016, but the staff began work in the fall of 2015 to prepare for Opening Night. The team was known simply as “Savannah Baseball” until they launched a name-the-team contest. After hundreds of submissions, only one stood out: the Savannah Bananas. Only one person suggested this name and on February 25, 2016 the team would reveal the brand new name and logo to the city. Immediately, the team gained both local and national attention for the name. The team has been featured on MSNBC, ESPN, CNN and Sports Illustrated.

Many recognize the Bananas for their social media marketing. Some of their most popular content includes music video parodies such as “Bananas are Back” as well as movie spinoffs, “Tytanic” and “The Sandlot”. Grayson Stadium has a capacity of 4,000 but through additional seating measures, the average number of fans during the 2017 season was 4,137 per game. In 2010, the Sand Gnats’ average attendance was 1,822 fans per game. Seventeen of the twenty-two games played during the inaugural season at Grayson Stadium were sold out and the team is currently on a 60-game sold out streak.

As of March 2019, the upcoming season only has twelve out of twenty-six games available.

Methods

The research for this project was collected via interviews of five full time Savannah Bananas staff members and five Savannah Bananas customers. These interviews we're conducted both in person and over the phone and each conversation was recorded and further transcribed for documentation purposes and research use. Interviews ranged from five to fifteen minutes. Research data was also collected via online survey. This survey took approximately five to seven minutes and was distributed through Qualtrics.

Selection Process

The selection process for staff member interviews involved reaching out through emails listed on the Savannah Bananas website. For customer interviews, the selection process was based off personal contacts of the researcher and through the Savannah Bananas Members Page, a Facebook group for those that purchase ticket packages. Anyone that agreed to partake in the interview was sent a letter of confidentiality that addressed their rights as a participant. Interviews were then scheduled and carried out in person or through the phone. The online survey was distributed through various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Group Me. It was also distributed through text messages. Rights of the participants we're listed before advancing to the first question of the survey. All participants in both the interviews and the online survey will

be kept completely anonymous. Basic demographics for the online survey can be found in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Figure 1. Gender of Online Survey Participants

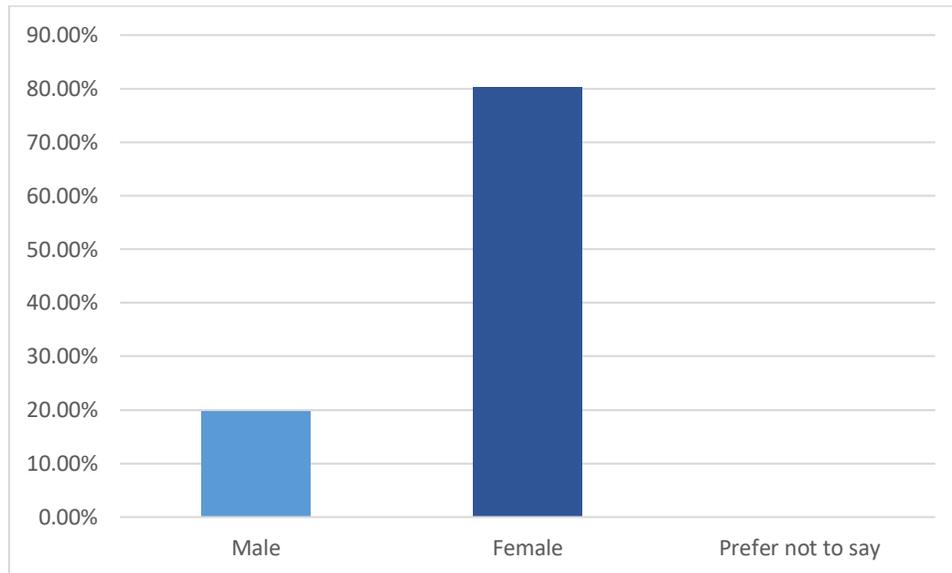


Figure 2. Age of Online Survey Participants

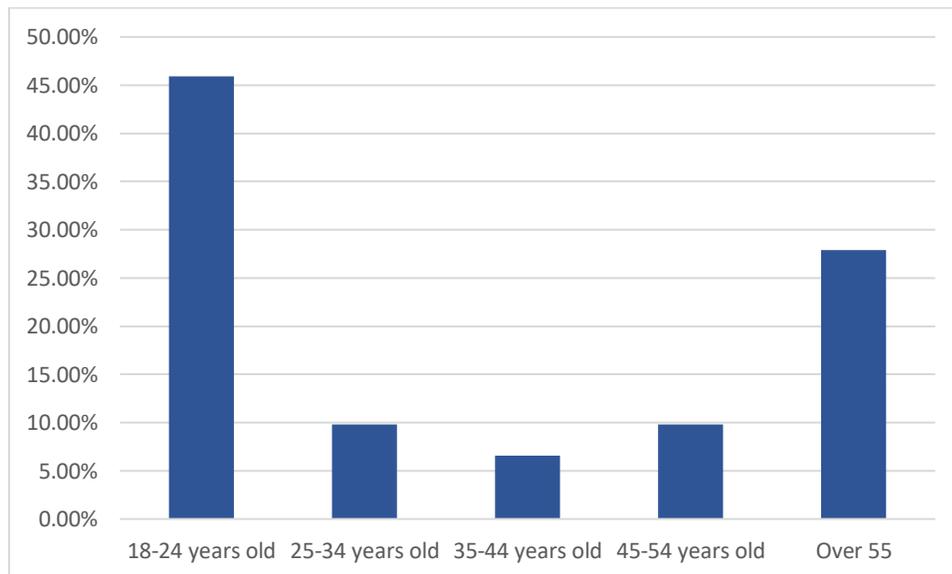
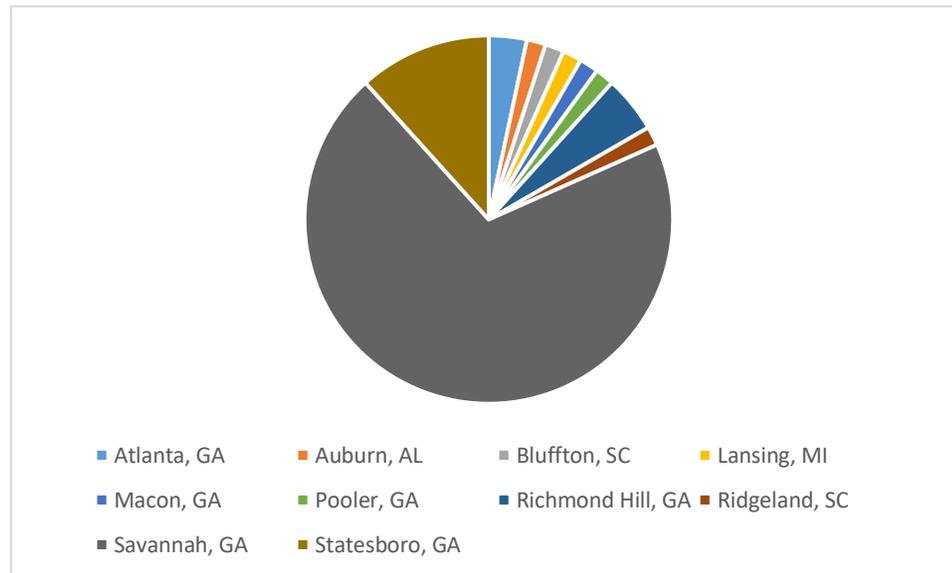


Figure 3. Where Online Participants Currently Live



Hypothesis

H1: Social media has positively affected the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas.

Without social media, the Bananas would not have gotten the instant viral attention received during the rebranding and initial launch of the team name. Social media created an accessible channel for people to express their opinions and gain more knowledge on the team.

H2: Social media has had a positive impact on the attraction and retention of

Savannah Bananas customers. The interaction with fans the Bananas conduct on their existing social media platforms has created a positive brand association with customers. As well as content produced by the team creating a positive impact on the customer's engagement and loyalty towards the team.

Results

The results show that the use of social media did impact the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas. Social media has also had a positive impact on the attraction and retention of Savannah Bananas fans.

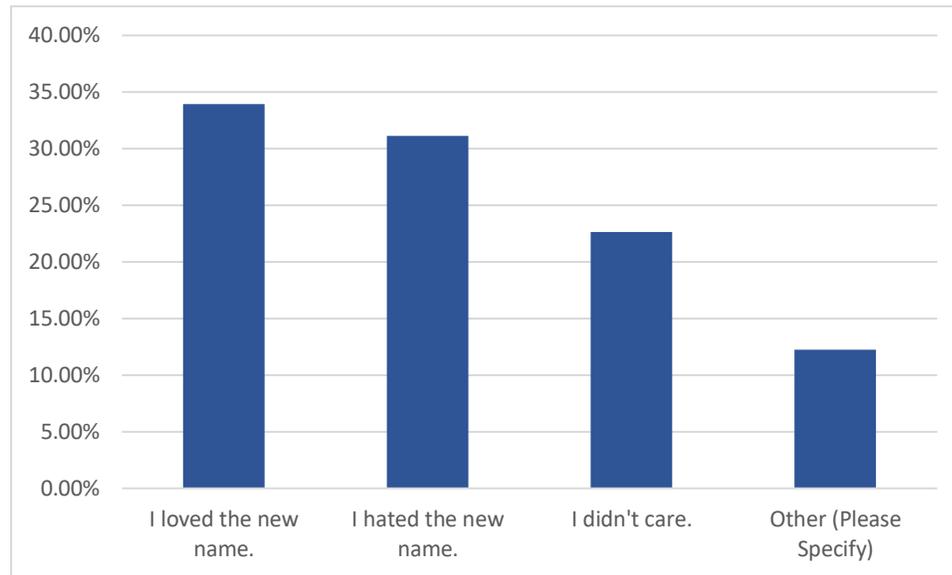
Social Media & Rebranding

The team launched their Facebook and Twitter pages in the fall of 2015 when they did not yet have a name. Immediately after the name launch, they created their Instagram page and eventually a Snapchat account. Throughout the interviews, it was abundantly clear that the main platform to impact the rebranding and launch of the team was Facebook. When asked what platform was most effective, the staff always stated Facebook first.

“Facebook was and still is our bread and butter here. That’s what we have used for every promotion, every video, every ticket sale. Our success has to do something with Facebook.”

Every platform was described as being impactful in a different way but all had a common goal: to engage with customers and fans. This priority of engagement became full-fledged with the name reveal. The announcement for the name of the new team was one of the most important factors in the rebranding. The Bananas wanted to bury any association with the Sand Gnats and create a brand new positive association with the city of Savannah and the team. The online survey had a total of 107 participants. Responses to the survey question *“What was your first thought when you heard the team name was now The Savannah Bananas?”* can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Customer Thoughts: New Team Name



Other responses included thinking the name was cheesy, funny, weird, and catchy. Two participants thought it was a joke for publicity. With the slight majority of participants loving it, the team still had a lot of people to win over. During customer interviews, a fan of the former Sand Gnats, recalled their initial thoughts and how they recall it affecting their attendance the inaugural season.

“I thought it would affect me going to games, but it didn’t. The team’s marketing won me over.”

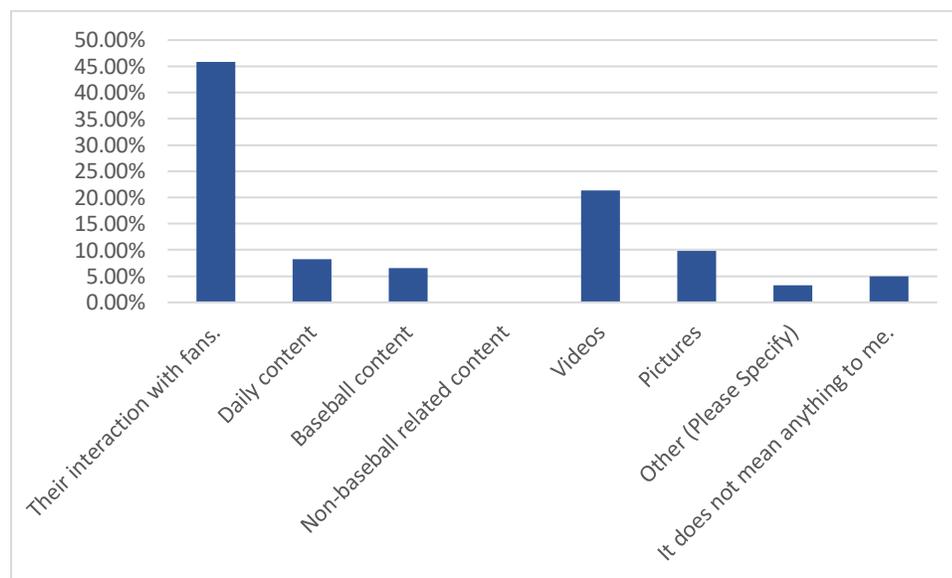
Since, the interviewee is now a Five Game Plan member, a ticket package that includes five of the most popular games of the season and tends to purchase an additional one to three single game tickets each season.

Both customers and staff contribute the effectiveness of social media to the approach taken by the team. Staff recognized the shift in content and marketing after the name change.

“It created a distinct point in time where people could see the shift in approach from what a night at the ballpark looked like. It went from being bland and boring, to outrageous and exciting.”

The team has gained over two million video views on Facebook, but it is not recorded how many of those we’re organic or from paid advertising. Participants in the online survey were asked “What component of the Bananas social media means the most to you?” Responses can be found in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Customer Thoughts: Content Meaningfulness



Participants stated the interaction with fans and the videos posted on the team’s social media mean the most to them. On the Bananas social media, you can see their interaction with fans. On a recent promotion video on their Facebook, fourteen comments we’re made. The Bananas account replied to eight of those comments and of the remaining comments, four we’re liked by the team and two were left with no interaction. They have

created an environment on social media where their followers know there is a human responding and not an automated response bot.

“I think their social media does a great job on connecting fans to the team. Seeing their posts and updates makes me feel as though I know them personally.”

The team relied on more traditional advertising such as local news coverage during the rebranding but has shifted since their success with social media. One of the staff members stated that they do not pay anything for traditional advertising anymore. Traditional advertising being labeled “too expensive” especially when you can target more efficiently through social media advertising.

“With TV and print, you have no idea who even saw your ad. You’re lumped in there with everyone else...On social media, we can target the people who like us, their friends, anyone who lives or works in Savannah. We can track all those people and see direct engagement with our content.”

Both staff and customers that were interviewed recalled the social media following, particularly Facebook, skyrocketing after the name reveal. The national attention from ESPN and other news outlets contributed to much of this. Although the immediate shift in content and engagement created by the team also positively impacted the social media growth during the rebranding.

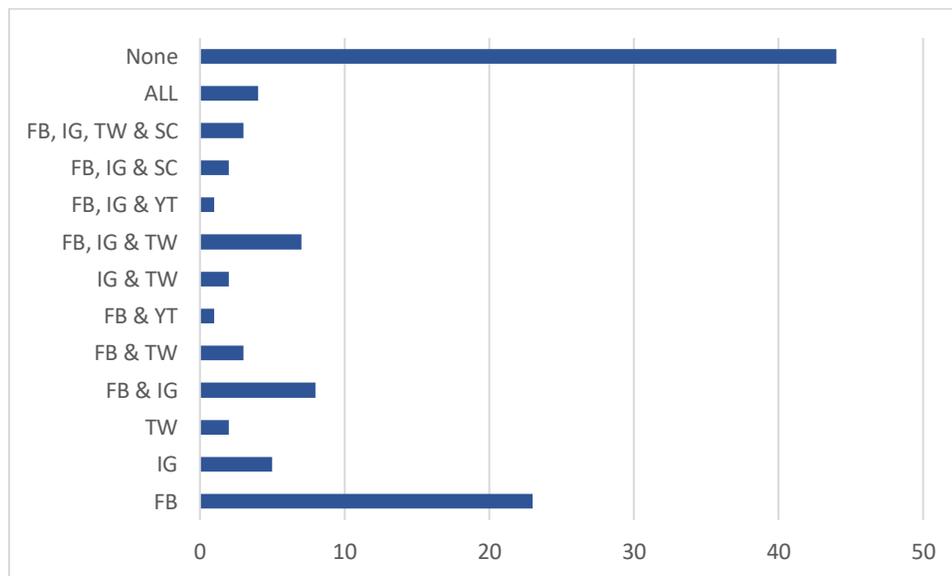
“When fans like something, they’re able to share it, and that reaches exponentially more people than if they just tell someone they know. It gives our fans a bigger platform to spread the word when something is good or bad.”

Even though 31% of online survey participants (Figure 4) stated they hated the name at first, approximately 60% of that group now follows the Bananas on at least one social media platform.

Social Media & Customer Attraction and Retention

The Bananas have created a following of over 28,000 subscribers on Facebook and over 14,000 subscribers on Instagram, their two most popular platforms. Social media growth is an important aspect for the Bananas. Figure 6 shows the platforms the online survey participants follow.

Figure 6. Social Media Followings of Participants

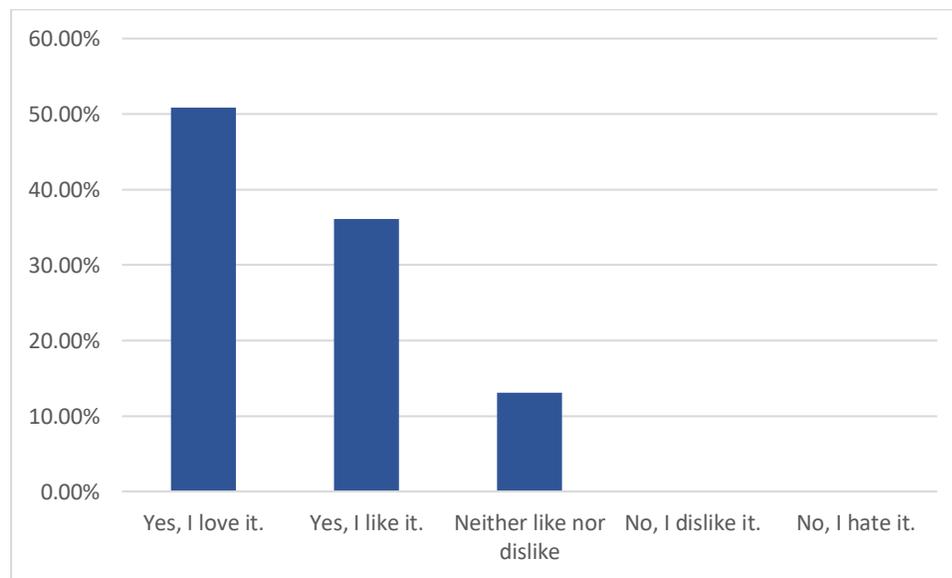


FB: Facebook IG: Instagram TW: Twitter SC: Snapchat YT: YouTube

55% of the survey participants follow the Bananas on at least one platform. Those that do follow the team on a platform, were asked about their experiences with the team’s social

media. As expected, those that follow the Bananas social media, do not dislike it. Some participants did state they neither like nor dislike it, but the overwhelming majority enjoys following the team. Referring to Figure 5, most followers enjoy the team’s interaction with fans and the videos they produce. This information can be contributed to why people enjoy following the team.

Figure 7. Follower Thoughts: Enjoyment of Social Media



The above chart shows responses to the question “Do you like following the Bananas on social media?”

The Bananas want to build a connection with every person that hears of them. To continue to create attraction to potential customers and retain attention of current customers, the team must create content that can peak any follower’s interest.

“It’s fresh. It’s new. It’s not the same thing every single time. We’re committed to putting out new content, timely content, baseball content, entertainment content...stuff

that kind of can hit nerve with a lot of different people, not just those that want to see baseball highlights. We have something for everybody.”

The team’s goal of creating a connection with customers can be shown in Figure 8. 84% of participants feel at least somewhat more connected with the team through social media.

Figure 8. Follower Connection with the Team’s Social Media

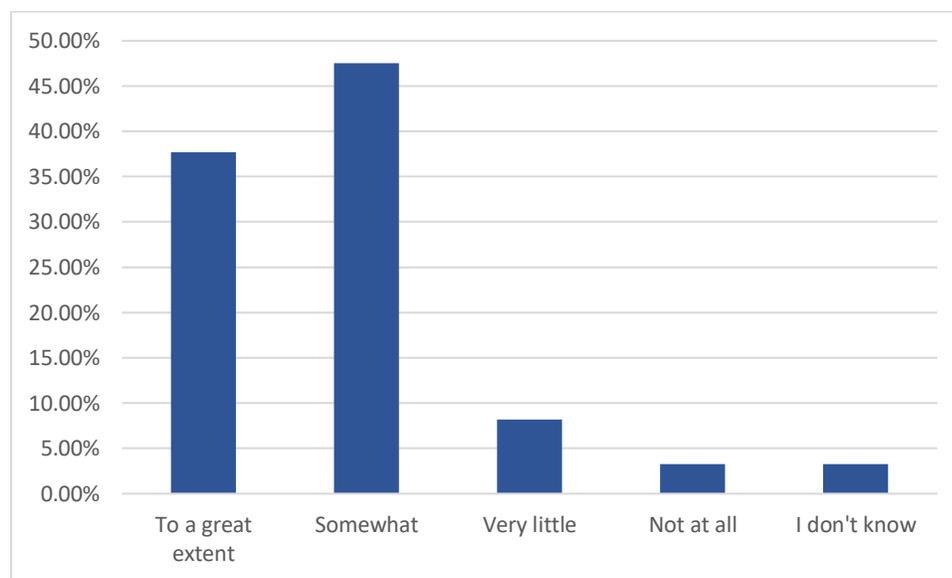
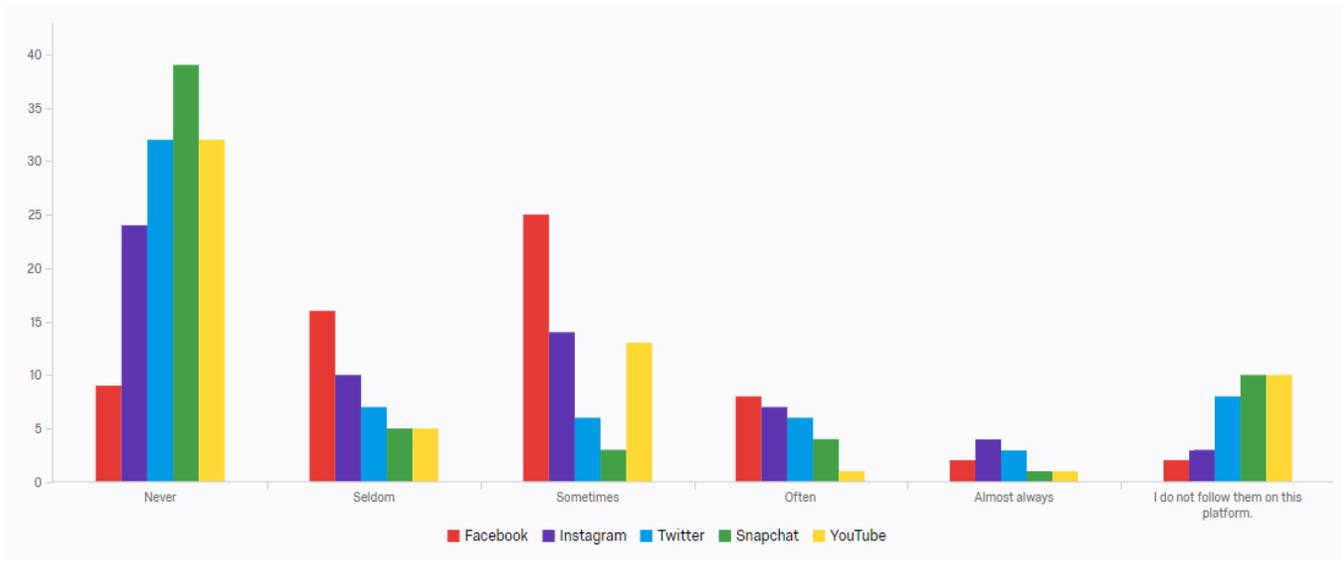


Figure 8 shows the response to the following question: Do you feel more connected with the team through the use of social media?

Of all the Bananas social media, Facebook and Instagram obtain the most engagement. Shown in Figure 9, fans tend to engage much less with Snapchat, YouTube and Twitter. The Bananas Snapchat account is only active during the season as the organization has gravitated more towards the trend of using Instagram stories during the off season.

Figure 9. Engagement on Savannah Bananas Social Media



Participants were asked to indicate how often they engage with the Bananas social media posts during the season.

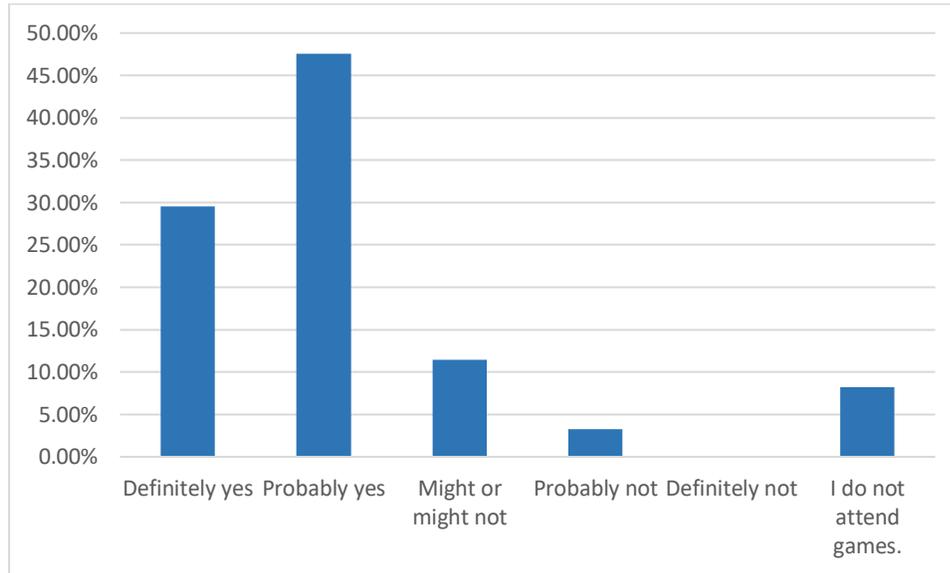
The goal of social media is to increase brand awareness and drive sales and profits. The Bananas see customer retention through engagement on social media (Figure 9) and game attendance. Social media impact on attendance is difficult to track for multiple reasons. The team has had social media since the launch of the name, so it's impossible to know how much better or worse they would have performed without an online presence. A staff member in the sales department believes the content they produce has had a positive impact on attendance.

“Since we shifted from trying to sell on social media to just making content, our online sales have gone up dramatically.”

The team tries to create a balance of sales content and content strictly for follower enjoyment that has no call to action. Participants in the online survey we're asked if the team's use of social media has had an impact on them attending games. Figure 10

supports the above staff member's statement that social media has made a positive impact on attendance at games.

Figure 10. Social Media's Impact on Attendance



Conclusion

Social media has positively affected the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas. The content posted and interaction with fans has impacted the attraction and retention of customers.

Social Media & Rebranding

Hypothesis one is supported based on the research collected. Social media positively affected the rebranding of the Savannah Bananas. Through national attention on big news outlets and the quickness of word spreading through social media, it allowed people all over the world to discover the team. More specifically, the Bananas use of social media marketing impacted the rebranding. By launching their social media around the name reveal, the team was able to provide people with an accessible channel to express their opinions and gain knowledge of the team. The Bananas immediate engagement with their customers on social media created a sense of personal connection with the organization. Content produced by the Bananas such as their music video and movie parodies have also gone viral leading them to gain more attention through social media. Facebook and Instagram being the most popular with the team in terms of followers and engagement.

Social Media & Customer Attraction and Retention

Social media has had a positive impact on the attraction and retention of customers. Therefore, hypothesis two is supported by the research conducted. Although some fans did not agree with the team at first, 60% of them now follow the team on at least one social media platform. It was found that customers that follow the Bananas

generally enjoy following them for their interaction with fans and video content. The team has differentiated themselves from a typical baseball team by the unusual content they post that can get everyone interested. Customers feel a sense of loyalty and connection with the Bananas using social media. This is leading those customers to attend games and continue following them on social media.

Future Research

The potential research in this area is exciting. The topic of social media is relevant in many businesses today. It is especially interesting in the sports industry, specifically baseball which has been declining in popularity. In 2018, attendance dropped by 8.6% overall in Major League Baseball (Kessler, 2018).

In terms of the Savannah Bananas, much more research can be conducted on their success. Interesting comparisons would be the affect social media has on merchandise sales. In game promotions and entertainment such as their dancing first base coach, play a large role in the team's success. The affect in game entertainment has on attraction and retention of customers could open an entire new discussion. To obtain results as accurately as possible, any online surveys distributed should try to reach a larger amount of people. Interviews conducted with the staff and customers were extremely beneficial to the research and would suggest helpful in future endeavors with this topic.

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