Road Races and Social Media – A Snapshot in 2015

by Alessio Punzi

ABSTRACT

In recent years the social media have become an increasingly important element of the overall media environment. Based on personal observations of the various social media channels and study of publically available publications, this report provides a snapshot of how running road race organisers currently use the social media to support their marketing efforts. It includes a short history of when organisations in the running industry embraced social media, an explanation of why social media and running races are intertwined, examples of the interactions between races and runners on social media, a discussion of how social media activity can be evaluated and outlines of new trends in this field. The author concludes that the social media have become important, if not essential, tools for race organisers. He also calls for more systematic and detailed research to help ensure that race organisers are making best use of the opportunities provided by social media and can improve their work in the future.

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M arketing a road running race is a multifaceted job. The tasks of an organiser include sparking the interest of runners, enticing them to register, informing them about race day logistics and engaging them with training tips and inspiration as they prepare for the event. Organisers must also meet the needs of their partners by generating exposure in the media and helping sponsors and charities to reach out to the runners so that they can achieve their own business or fund raising objectives. Working with the media means feeding them with stories, interviews, photos, maps, results, statistics and other information, both on a reliable schedule and when a special demand arises. On race day the general population needs to be informed about road closures and public transport disruptions, spectators need tips on the best spots to view the action and cheer on the participants, and families and friends need to know where to reconnect post-race with their sweaty loved ones.

To be successful in these and other communication tasks demands both competence in using a number of channels and a year-round strategy, even if it is focused on an event that happens on just one day.

In recent years the social media – widely accessible Internet-based applications that allow anyone to easily publish and access information, collaborate on common efforts and build relationships – have become an increasingly important element of the overall media environment. Road running races have made use of the opportunities offered to support their marketing efforts. Moreover, the runners themselves have used social media to share experiences and ideas around their participation in races, which is an important part of building awareness and shaping the image of these events. The situation is characterised by constant change and innovation that are driven by both advancing technology and the imagination of users.

The aim of this report is to an understanding in this area by presenting a snapshot of the relationship between road running races and social media, including a brief history, descriptions of some of the means and techniques organisers currently use, and outlines of trends that are likely to impact development in the future. The focus is on the discourse of the relationship and it is based on personal observations and publically available information that are cross-referenced with a purpose-built framework extracted from a previous study on social media and the running industry.

Paid, Owned and Earned Media

A traditional categorisation of the media that any organisation employs in its marketing and communications efforts classifies them into three categories: paid, owned and earned. Think of *paid media* as traditional advertising. Online, this includes banner ads, paid tweets and sponsored posts and search results. *Owned media* is the content over which an organisation has complete control, such as a website, blogs, newsletters and social media accounts. *Earned media* is the natural result of public and media relations efforts – included what is done with owned media channels. When someone an organisation has not hired or contracted is mentioning, tweeting, posting or re-pinning information about the organisation or its activities it is earned media.

Paid media lets a race organiser reach vast audiences – but has the disadvantage that runners, just like any other consumer group, are already inundated daily with advertising and will often ignore pure brand messages. To get this point, readers close to the sport industry only need to think of how many newsletters with a running-related subject lines they delete before even opening. Pushing out messages on a race's owned media may seem free-of-cost – but there is still a need to build a community, create content and otherwise bring value to the runners' conversation to make any kind of impact. Earned media is probably the most cost-effective method of marketing. Even if major race organisers invest in paid media, and most do, and have owned media channels, and almost all do, earned media helps them to increase the impact.

Increasingly, earned media for running events is a consequence of social media activity being virtually all road races around the globe being on one or more social media channels – albeit with varying degrees of activity. For the ability they have to multiply earned media, social media are probably the best way to reach an event's varied audiences and keep them engaged and informed through race-day. To quote Forbes' tech contributor Jayson De-Mers, social media is "the most effective method of expanding the reach and vi-sibility of your content"[1]. Moreover, race organisers can measure social media for how much exposure they achieve, see what people online think of them ("sentiment") or how they are doing in the market compared to their competitors ("share of voice").

When Did It Start?

Tracing the origins of the relationship between road running and social media is tricky. Online social networks, in a way, have been there since the inception of the Internet. Already in the 1990s marathon-themed online forums abounded, but the role of the events in this phenomenon was limited. To get a more useful picture we should rather ask when social media *marketing* by the races began. When did organisers start to understand and take seriously the marketing potential of what we refer to today as social media? To answer this question, we have selected two indicators to show the start of the trend of running events going social.

Given Facebook's quasi-ubiquitous penetration, the first indicator is a race's Facebook page creation date. Facebook pages were launched in late 2007, although until mid-2010 they were known as "Fan Pages". At the beginning of the Facebook global boom (approximately 2009, when in 12 months it more than doubled its users to 360 million) most races had "profiles", as if they were human beings rather than properties. Fan Pages began to proliferate when people started opening up Facebook profiles en masse: since the number of friends a personal profile could have was (and still is) capped at 5,000, organisations including running races shifted from profiles to Fan Pages. Table 1 shows when some major races and other running industry players (shoes and apparel companies, running-related media) created their Facebook pages.

Our second selected indicator is the date that a race's Twitter account was first opened (Table 2).

Based on these simple data we can see that road races and the rest of the running industry jumped on to the social media bandwagon between late 2008 and 2010. This is more or less the same period when the position of Social Media Manager became universally recognised as essential for businesses (the expression "social media manager" started trending on Google in the summer of 2009).

Table 1: Dates of Facebook page creation in the running industry

Major Road Races	Other Players (shoe and apparel companies, running-related media)
June 2008: Peachtree Road Race	January 2008: Runner's World (USA)
September 2008: Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series	August 2008: New Balance
April 2009: New York Marathon	February 2009: Saucony
August 2009: Bay to Breakers, Chicago Marathon	March 2009: Jogging International (FRA)
September 2009: London Marathon	March 2009: Puma Running
November 2009: Rome Marathon	April 2009: Nike Running
January 2010: Berlin Marathon, Boston Marathon	November 2009: Asics
March 2010: Göteborgs Varvet	August 2010: Runner's World (GBR)
July 2010: Great North Run, Run Disney Series	February 2011: Brooks Running
September 2010: Gold Coast Marathon	March 2012: adidas Running
November 2010: Paris Marathon	June 2012: Salomon Running
August 2012: World Marathon Majors	

Table 2: Dates of Twitter account creation in the running industry

Major Road Races	Other Players (shoe and apparel companies, running-related media)
March 2008: Peachtree Road Race	May 2008: Runner's World (USA)
July 2008: Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series	August 2008: Running Times
January 2009: Bay to Breakers	February 2009: adidas Running, Saucony, Puma Running, Asics Europe
May 2009: Gold Coast Marathon	March 2009: Brooks Running, Salomon
July 2009: London Marathon	April 2009: Women's Running (USA), Asics America
August 2009: New York Marathon	June 2009: Asics Australia
October 2009: Nike Running Women Series	January 2010: Jogging International (FRA)
November 2009: Rome Marathon	August 2010: Men's Running (GBR)
January 2010: Bogota Half Marathon	December 2010: New Balance Running
February 2010: Boston Marathon	July 2011: Nike Running
May 2010: Berlin Marathon	
June 2010: Great Run Series	
March 2011: GöteborgsVarvet	
July 2011: Chicago Marathon	
August 2011: World Marathon Majors	
March 2012: Paris Marathon	
May 2012: Run Disney Series	

Why Are Running Events and Social Media So Intertwined?

Currently we are experiencing a second worldwide running boom (after that of the 1970s). According to Running USA, the American distance running association that publishes an annual state of the sport report, each of the past five years has shown participation growth, with new demographics increasingly lacing up their shoes. A feature of this second wave is that running has become much more informal, mainstream and social. Average finish times have increased (the median time for male marathon finishers in the US went from 3:32.17 in 1980 to 4:19:27 in 2014), and runners are generally more concerned with overall fitness than with race performance[2].

In fact, we can see that road running races have been rebranded as "mass participa-tion" events. It is not about winning as much as simply taking part and receiving benefits on a personal level. Fun runs, to which we owe much of the recent increase in the number of participants, are by definition welcoming and non-judgmental. This environment is perfect for the capabilities of social media. People are influenced by social sharing and are more likely to participate when they see friends and family sharing photos and info from running events on social media channels. Running USA calls this the "wow-factor"[3].

The spark that ignited the first running boom came from within individuals – it happened because runners loved running. Conversely, in this second wave, many events are deliberately designed by marketers and policymakers, which makes for a natural integration of social media within the race experience. In some niches of the world of running, it is actually the social me-

dia footprint that drives the business strategy. This is certainly true in the case of the explosive growth of "non-traditional" running events like Color Runs and Tough Mudder, which are natural sources of social media content and promote themselves mainly through these means.

In a 2008 study[4], KIM examined the relationship-quality aspect of relationship marketing in a sport context by considering the impact of seven relationship-quality constructs (trust, commitment, satisfaction, love [liking], intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity) on sport consumption behaviours. Each of these constructs is key in running, particularly in this mass participation era, and each is likely to receive a boost by the right social media activity. Race organisers, and the rest of the running industry, have recognised this and are constantly trying to push the right buttons through interactions using cost-effective social media.

Races and Runners: Social Media Interactions

Social media marketing is essentially relationship marketing. It aims at building long-term relationships with the organisation's best customers, generating further business and ultimately profit. It also contributes to strengthening brand awareness, increasing understanding of consumer needs, enhancing loyalty, and providing additional value for consumers.

A 2013 report[5] by online sentiment analyst Channel Signal defines five moments of a runner's relationship with a race on social media:

Decision - This is when the runner's purchase of a race entry is made. Typical post: registration page screenshot with "Oops I did it again" caption.

Training - The runner puts in the miles, fund raises (if, as it is often the case, his/her participation is related to a social cause), gets information on nutrition and on how to keep injuries at bay. Typical post: "Just finished a 20-mile run. Marathon here we come. #NoPainNoGain".

Event - This is the race itself and immediate post-race time. Typical posts: picture of the bib on the hotel bed with running gear carefully aligned.

Afterglow - This is when the runner tells about his/her journey through the finish line, and thanks organisers, fellow athletes, volunteers. Typical post: a long note on Facebook with thoughts about the race and improvement suggestions to organisers.

Announcement - This is the end and the restart of the cycle, when a still-elated athlete considers registering for a new race. Typical post: "Can't wait to register for next year's marathon".

Each of these moments is an engagement opportunity for the race organiser, and calls for specific content. Content is the life-blood of social media and it is often said that, "online, content is king". Outstanding content has to be "native", i.e. tailored on the specific platform. Just because Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest have overlapping functions does not mean they attract the same audiences or the audiences value the same things. Some networks are designed for concise content (like a congratulatory message to runners who have finished a marathon on that weekend), others for artsy photos (like the sculpted calves of the Kenyan winner), others for behind-the-scenes glimpses (like volunteers enjoying an after-race beer).

In the following sections we give an overview of the most common content used by race organisers on social media cross referenced to the five stages mentioned above.

Decision

In many races where the number of runners is limited or "capped", the decision phase necessarily coincides with the registration and/or ballot opening days, since places in these events sell out fast. In non-capped races, this phase usually lasts until three months prior to race day. Organisers want to drive traffic to their websites, with the aim of transforming

Figure 1: Announcement of the London Marathon entry ballot opening period on Instagram

Figure 2: A Venice Marathon post advertising re-maining race places five months prior to race day, on Facebook

Figure 3: The Berlin Marathon's announcement of extra charity entries on Facebook

friends and followers ("leads") into potential participants (prospects). Typical content includes a countdown to registration opening, past edition videos and photos, messages from partner charities ("Run for us"). Messages of exclusivity and urgency (a ticking countdown clock) work well. Figures 1 through 3 give examples of messages used in this phase.

Training

The training phase is normally the longest of the phases and the content used varies significantly from race to race. The basic aims are: 1) to make sure participants have a race experience as enjoyable as possible; 2) to generate extra revenues by selling add-ons (finisher's tee-shirt, merchandise, meals, tickets to post-race parties, etc.); 3) to provide sponsors with activation opportunities and to support charities; and 4) to keep generating leads for future events.

The first goal is achieved by keeping runner's motivation high (through tutorials, sharing of inspirational stories and iconic pictures, countdowns, celebration of festivities close to runners' hearts such as the anniversary of an
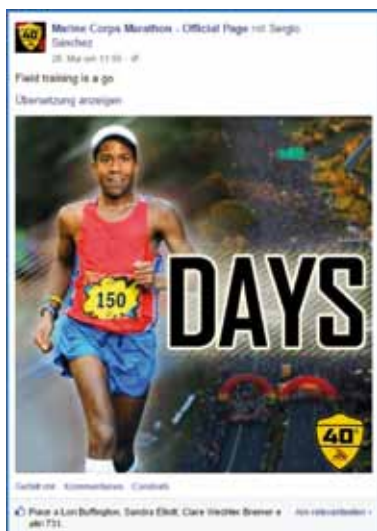

Figure 5: London Marathon training and motivation message on Twitter

Olympic triumph or the birthday of a running legend, etc.); by helping them prepare properly for the race (training and nutrition tips, shoe advice, info on pacing – particularly important for first-timers) and by providing timely and accurate information for a hassle-free race. Figures 4 and 5 give examples.

For the second goal, sales-oriented messages are pushed ("Like our new limited-edition t-shirt? Shop now") and special offers are often designed for particular days (Black Friday, International Running Day, etc.). See Figure 6.

Figure 4: Training countdown post for the Marine Corps Marathon on Facebook

Figure 6: New York City Marathon's "T-shirt Tuesday" announcement on Instagram

Figures 7 and 8 are examples of how a the content of a sponsor or charity partner can be adjusted in to serve the race organisers' communication goals – otherwise what you get is an advertisement – but still promote the partner's messages. Retweets, re-pins and re-post are frequent.

With regard to the fourth aim, as organisers communicate with their registered participants about any of the first three they are also nurturing the relationship with future potential runners.
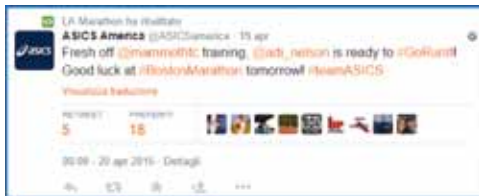

Figure 7: Los Angeles Marathon retweets title sponsor's message on Twitter

Figure 8: The Great Run retweets about a charity runner on Twitter

Event

In the event phase, there is a fine balance to strike, with public service announcements and race information having to go hand in hand with final inspiration messages. Many organisers take advantage of their social media traffic to promote partner events (see Figure 9) – and of course this is when charity partners and sponsors prefer to reach out to runners (see Figure 10).

Figure 9: Kuala Lumpur Marathon promoting a partner event on its Facebook page

Figure 10: Race day -1: Bay to Breakers feed reposting a sponsor's post on Instagram

Afterglow

After the event, organisers and their partners have the possibility to leverage the runners' "state of grace" to sell additional race-related services or products (personalised race photos/DVDs, medal frames, memorabilia), and to let sponsors access runners on a more emotional level (see Figure 11). As this is a period when runners gather information on their next potential race it is the best time to push information about next year's edition and try to convert leads into actual customers.

Figure 11: Post-event, the London Marathon You-Tube channel features a video of one of its sponsors' activation

Evaluating Social Media Activity

The successful use of social media means that every Steve Prefontaine quote tweeted as Monday Motivation and every posted photo of an ecstatic finisher needs to serve a clear purpose. The questions that event organisers must eventually ask themselves include: How is social media activity serving my event's broader objectives? Is my social media budget achieving value for money?

At this stage we can only speculate about the overall effectiveness of races' social media operations and organisers' satisfaction, as we are not aware of a systematic quantitative study in this area. What we can do is discuss how such an evaluation might be conducted. The International Association for the Measurement and the Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), a global trade association for media evaluation companies, has developed a useful framework for answering the questions organisers should be asking. To evaluate, you need metrics. But not all metrics are created equal. Having a cascade of retweets might tickle organisers' egos, but how can they make sure it helps them sell bibs? AMEC uses the following three categories to classify metrics:

Channel metrics – These are straightforward and usually unique to specific social media channels (e.g. the number of mentions on Twitter, shares on Facebook, likes on YouTube, etc.).

Programme metrics – These are directly tied to the objectives of a social media activity (e.g. how much has website referral traffic increased since a particular account was opened?).

Business metrics – These are designed to measure the impact of social media activity on the ultimate goals of the organisation, and they should drive strategic decisions. (e.g. How many first-time runners were attracted? How many few complaints were received from uninformed residents?)

Data on channel metrics are in most cases publicly available. For example, we know that the NYC Marathon boasts 170,000 Facebook fans, and that the Milano City Marathon has 56,000 followers on Twitter. We can even know how influential their profiles are, thanks to a number of automated tools that track cross-platform social media influence and engagement – the best known of which (albeit criticised for its lack of transparency and less regarded than some years ago) is Klout. Klout analyses activity on social media and provides a score ranging from 1-100. For example, the London Marathon and Rock 'n' Roll Marathon series have 80, the Chicago Marathon hits 63, the huge Tokyo Marathon only 47.

Programme metrics are available to administrators only. Social media's built-in insights tools – as well as a website's stats page – tell how many people landed on a registration page thanks, for example, to a specific Twitter Card.

Business metrics are defined by an organiser's ontological questions about the race. What am I trying to accomplish? Get more runners? Raise awareness for a social cause? Fight physical inactivity? Support my city's Olympic ambitions? The answers will vary based on the nature of the organiser. Road races are organised by for-profit companies, national athlet-

ics federations, athletics clubs, charities, city councils, media outlets and others. Accordingly they all have different rationales and, hence, different ways to define success.

A deeper understanding of the relationship between races and social media will be gained from research that captures digital analytic data on programme metrics as well as interviews with organisers or their social media managers to determine the parameters they use to define their business metrics.

New Trends in Social Media

Digital marketing commentators often compile charts of what is trending on social media, or launch forecasts of the next big things in digital. At present, there seems to be consensus on the rise of a few tendencies.

Social Video - Sharing short video content is widely recognised as an effective social marketing tactic for bringing attention to a business. Michael Stelzner, founder of the highly influential Social Media Marketing World Conference, called 2015 the "Year of Native Video"[6]. What is native on social video platforms? Examples include behind-the-scenes, stop-motions, humour and brief how-to clips: road running has a wealth of opportunities. By posting clips on Instagram (which doubled its diffusion between 2012 and 2014 and is now the fastest-growing major social media), and six-second loops on the still-popular Vine, race organisers can engage runners and create buzz about their events. Plus, there is a great deal of user-generated content that can be taken advantage of.

Ephemeral Content - Platforms for the sharing of self-destroying content, like Snapchat, are now mainstream. Short-lived media redefine friendships, individuality and creativity as we no longer have to worry about our public image. Such apps are hugely popular among millennials (in the US, 71% of Snapchat's users are younger than 24 years old[7]): one of the most interesting demographics for marketers – and a new market for race organisers. The 2015 Boston Marathon took advantage of the Snapchat feature "Stories" (which strings users' photos and videos together to create a narrative that lasts for 24 hours) to create an emotional, user-generated account of how a race, a city and its population can come together for a celebration of life (See Figure 12).

Agile Marketing - Pushing relevant content just at the right time drives engagement and generates lots of earned media. Leveraging pop culture and running-unrelated facts of the day helps to access new segments of unfamiliarised users.

S-Commerce - "Buy" buttons are now a somewhat familiar sight alongside certain tweets and posts, allowing users to make purchases without even leaving the network. With e-commerce and social media integrations deepening (Social Media Commerce), road races have another sales channel to employ – an immediate, emotions-driven one. "Like this photo of our event you just saw on Facebook? Your bib for next year's edition is just two clicks away".

Figure 12: The 2015 Boston Marathon Snapchat story

Conclusion

This report has provided a snapshot of how running road race organisers currently use social media and other aspects of the relationship between the two that is based on personal observations of interactions on the various social media channels and study of publically available publications. We can conclude that the social media have become important, if not essential, tools for race organisers to promote their events and that all serious organisers have embraced them albeit with varying degrees of activity.

As the running industry is such a major element of the overall world of athletics, ensuring that race organisers are making best use the opportunities provided by social media and can improve in the future is of interest for the whole sport. To this end more systematic and detailed research would be beneficial. The IAAF, through its Road Running Commission, and AIMS (Association of International Marathons and Distance Races) seem to be the bodies best placed to encourage such work.

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