

LeBron, Embiid, Antetokounmpo: Why the NBA's MVPs are marketing gold

By Robin Clarke, SportsPro – 21 February 2018

Sporting stars are some of the most followed and active on social media today. Whether it's David Beckham sharing snapshots of intimate family moments with his 42 million Instagram followers, or Anthony Joshua having a jab at Tyson Fury on Twitter, it's a force to be reckoned with. But one sport in particular is really making its mark – basketball.

Top players such as LeBron James, James Harden and Steph Curry are driving interaction with fans online, so much so that they are becoming a pivotal part in the movement of the sport. They are making their mark in helping the National Basketball Association (NBA) to become the new National Football League (NFL) of American culture - and for marketers, it's an opportunity not to be missed.

The NBA Basketball Social Performance Index (SPI) study, compiled by Publicis Media Sports and Entertainment (PMSE), ranked athletes' reach, engagement, growth and frequencies on social media. It revealed some key trends driving this new culture in the NBA and helped us understand exactly how marketers can take advantage of this rich dialogue.

Next-gen fans are key

From our findings, it's the upcoming stars of the NBA that are making a name for themselves. The Milwaukee Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Philadelphia 76ers' Joel Embiid were recently named All-Star starters, demonstrating how younger and more socially engaging players are already amassing loyal fanbases. Coincidentally, all three players who scored high in early All-Star voting experienced an increase in their SPI score this year: Antetokounmpo (+47), Embiid (+29) and the New York Knicks' Kristaps Porziņģis (+11).

Let's take Embiid as an example of someone who has helped transform the culture of the NBA through social. He is entertaining, true to himself and shares content that spans beyond his expertise to include other global sports. Despite having less followers than Golden State Warriors' Klay Thompson, he's more skilled at engaging his fanbase - having generated 11,000 more likes and 3,800 more comments over the past year. Interestingly, his popularity extends far beyond 76ers devotees, with roughly 98 per cent of his followers not being 76ers fans or even following the team on social. His 29-point jump in off-season ranking compared to 2016 is also an indication of his growing global presence.





Jae Crowder of the Utah Jazz, again a young player, moved up the ranks of our SPI for his strong engagement rate and ability to balance personal and professional life, all while adding a sense of humor. Crowder's score grew by more than 122 per cent over the year, partly due to his move from the Boston Celtics to the Cleveland Cavaliers and the fact that off-season social chatter kept him in the spotlight.

The more drama, the better

The growth of social media, teamed with use of the league's greatest players, has given fans from around the world a front-row seat for the drama unfolding on and off the court. Media rights for the NBA are much more flexible than the NFL, so content can more easily go viral. But it's the popularity of emojis and witty fans that are driving rumors on everything from trade deals to who's dating whom.

More importantly, you also have NBA royalty like Steph and LeBron weighing in directly on anything to do with game day commentary, family life or even societal events. This new stem of social media activity has prompted a new, abbreviated language to emerge - and it's not just NBA fans who can understand these conversations.

Content reigns

Be it a young, up and coming player, or top of league star, their social media engagement is not guaranteed. Great content is the key to driving followers, likes and fans. James Harden, the fifth-most followed player, and Kevin Durant, the second-most followed player, are two examples of solid players who do not offer a true look behind the scenes, so their SPI score has dropped since 2016. Steph and LeBron, on the other hand, chime in on current events and aren't afraid to share an inside view of their family and personal life, driving greater authenticity and consistently earning them a spot at the top on our SPI listing.

According to our research, the average daily engagement driven by the top 117 players doubled in 2017, while frequency of posting remained the same. Players were posting about the same amount, but fans were more engaged and the rise of Instagram is a key reason why. According to eMarketer, nearly 594 million people worldwide used Instagram regularly in 2017, representing about a quarter of social network users.

NBA players, just like the David Beckhams of the world, are becoming social media stars in their own right. It's an exciting opportunity for marketers, not only to drive greater awareness or association, but to build an affiliation with a certain player, ultimately driving greater ROI. From our research we can see that there are still players who hold a strong SPI ranking who have not yet been engaged for marketing endorsements.

We recommend brands snap up these players and take the opportunity while it's there. These untapped social media superstars may be the key to marketing success as NBA players keep the conversations going once the buzzer has sounded.

SPI RANKING	PLAYER	TEAM	CHANGE YEAR ON YEAR	SPI INDEX				
				REACH	ENGAGEMENT	GROWTH	FREQUENCY	TOTAL SCORE
1	LEBRON JAMES	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	--	2133	2413	66	209	4,820
2	STEPHEN CURRY	GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS	--	810	1306	115	92	2,323
3	DWYANE WADE	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	--	636	567	56	648	1,908
4	DAMIAN LILLARD	PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS	--	181	455	90	1081	1806
5	RUSSELL WESTBROOK	OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER	--	418	879	130	146	1573
6	KYRIE IRVING	BOSTON CELTICS	--	380	704	111	35	1230
7	KEVIN DURANT	GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS	▲+7	618	182	38	205	1043
8	CJ MCCOLLUM	PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS	▼-1	19	80	389	417	905
9	ISAIAH THOMAS	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	▲+7	95	184	591	28	897
10	KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE	LOS ANGELES LAKERS	▲+86	3	7	857	23	891
11	CHRIS PAUL	HOUSTON ROCKETS	▼-2	420	259	85	125	889
12	J.R. SMITH	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	▲+1	90	336	20	436	882
13	JAMES HARDEN	HOUSTON ROCKETS	▼-5	269	345	158	108	880
14	PAU GASOL	SAN ANTONIO SPURS	▼-3	287	172	75	301	835
15	CARMELO ANTHONY	OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER	▼-5	452	215	57	69	793
16	JAE CROWDER	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	▲+38	7	14	734	25	779
17	PAUL GEORGE	OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER	▼-2	243	301	105	70	720
18	IMAN SHUMPERT	CLEVELAND CAVALIERS	▲+1	74	144	58	443	718
19	JOHN WALL	WASHINGTON WIZARDS	▲+4	179	238	79	218	715
20	GIANNIS ANETOKOUNMPO	MILWAUKEE BUCKS	▲+47	54	180	388	74	695
21	BRADLEY BEAL	WASHINGTON WIZARDS	▲+50	22	52	165	346	584
22	JOEL EMBIID	PHILADELPHIA 76ERS	▲+29	53	149	312	48	563
23	KRISTAPS PORZINGIS	NEW YORK KNICKS	▲+11	41	179	215	126	561
24	RUDY GOBERT	UTAH JAZZ	▲+18	12	13	439	36	499
25	STEVEN ADAMS	OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER	▲+48	11	8	433	41	493
26	ANDRE IGUODALA	GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS	▲+27	93	26	91	270	479
27	DEVIN BOOKER	PHOENIX SUNS	▲+65	52	115	236	73	475
28	HASSAN WHITESIDE	MIAMI HEAT	▲+21	22	45	296	112	475
29	CJ MILES	TORONTO RAPTORS	▲+29	2	6	170	288	465
30	NICK YOUNG	GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS	▲+15	88	95	53	228	464

METHODOLOGY: THE SPI INDEX ANALYSES REACH, ENGAGEMENT, GROWTH AND FREQUENCY OF POSTING ON FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM AND TWITTER BETWEEN 2016-2017 OFF-TRADE SEASON.
SOURCE: PUBLICIS MEDIA SPORT & ENTERTAINMENT AND BLINKFIRE ANALYTICS

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