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Thesis: The effect of official college athletic Web sites on the job of Division I sports information directors
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Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this research was to determine the effect of official athletic Web sites on the job of Division I sports information directors and how the position has changed as a result. First, a pretest was conducted to test the survey design and attempt to locate any problems that could occur with the survey. Although 11 people were contacted about participating in the pretest – 10 Division II sports information directors and 1 member of CoSIDA – there was only one response. Therefore, there was not a lot of feedback about the survey content, but it was still important in ensuring that the survey was functioning properly online and that it was accessible through the link provided in the e-mail.

For the final survey, all 327 Division I sports information directors were invited via e-mail to participate in the online survey. However, problems arose with a handful of e-mail addresses. Four were returned because the recipient was no longer employed at the school in that capacity, and the new contact information was gathered from the schools' official Web sites and the invitation was resent. However, there were eight addresses that returned the e-mail and upon checking the contact information, nothing had been updated on the official school sites that would suggest another person was working as the sports information director. One e-mail was returned because it was identified as "spam" mail.

The e-mail was then resent individually to that recipient, but it was once again refused. Therefore, there were nine recipients who could not be reached and this decreased the sample size to 318. Of those successfully contacted, 142 participated in the survey for a response rate of 44.6 percent. Because respondents were not required to answer all questions, the tables and percentages calculated in this chapter have been done so based on the actual number of valid responses for each question.

Background

Since the survey was conducted anonymously and no identifying characteristics were asked of the participants, basic demographic questions were asked in order to ascertain an understanding of the overall group of respondents. It was learned that 54.5 percent work for an institution that competes athletically at the Division I-A level, with 35.5 percent competing at Division I-AA and 10 percent at Division I-AAA, as seen in table 1. These numbers are slightly inconsistent with the actual makeup of Division I, in which I-A comprises 35.8 percent, I-AA 36.1 percent, and I-AAA 28.1 percent (ncaa.org). It is possible that a skewing occurred here because not all participants responded to this question. Therefore, certain subdivisions may have been better represented than what was reported.

Table 1: Level of athletic competition

Level	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Division I-A	60	54.5%
Division I-AA	39	35.5%
Division I-AAA	11	10.0%

Schools of various sizes were each well represented, with the largest number (24.3 percent) of respondents coming from schools with a total enrollment of 5,000 – 10,000 students and the smallest number (13.5 percent) representing schools with an enrollment of 15,001 – 20,000, as seen in table A-1, Appendix H. Finally, 60.7 percent of respondents work for a public institution and 39.3 for a private institution, as seen in table A-2, Appendix H.

Because the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of official college athletic Web sites on the job of Division I sports information directors, it was necessary for all respondents to work in a department that manages such a site. Therefore, participants were asked if their college or university has an official athletic Web site. Only one person replied negatively, as seen in table A-3, Appendix H, and he/she was then taken directly to the end of the survey because the questions asked were not pertinent to someone without a Web site.

The results

While official college athletic Web sites may function in various roles depending on the program, one thing that can be agreed upon is their importance. An overwhelming majority of sports information directors rate the importance of their site to their collegiate program as above average, with more than half (53.2 percent) labeling it as crucial. Based on that response, it is surprising that one respondent still said that his/her site is of minimal importance, as seen in table 2.

Table 2: Importance of official athletic Web sites to collegiate programs

Importance	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Crucial, cannot live without	59	53.2%
Very important	47	42.3%
Average importance	4	3.6%
Minimal importance	1	0.9%
Not important	0	0%

One of the reasons that these sites have become so important is the ability to reach a large audience. While most schools have a wide target audience that often includes media, students, alumni, athletes' families, other schools, and the general public, some reach farther beyond. Some sites also direct content toward the school's faculty and staff, while some have found it useful for donors, ticket buyers, coaches, conference offices, researchers, and the general sports fan.

For some schools, this target audience has not changed over time, and some SIDs contend that it has been the goal all along to reach everyone possible. Others find it more beneficial to have a smaller target audience, such as the respondent who said his/her site has "always aimed at the parents and families and fans. The main reason is that we get little to no coverage in any media outside our community, so this is the first place people can look for any information."

But many programs have seen a shift in intended audience, particularly in the area of recruiting. It may not necessarily be a new audience for some schools, but one of increased importance. For instance, one school that had primarily focused on the fans and media has since added a form for prospective student-athletes, a useful tool for recruits.

Another SID mentioned that recruits are more likely to look at the online version of the media guide instead of the print copy, and another pointed out the value of the site for coaches, who can use it as a way of informing recruits of the type of exposure they can expect.

Another area that is becoming more targeted is a school's alumni, and some sites look to benefit in terms of marketing and fundraising, including one school that utilizes its site to help efforts to increase revenue for scholarships and capital projects. Athletes' families are visiting some sites more heavily, and the focus has shifted in that direction. One SID said that the parents "seem to live and die for our postings." While some schools find that the media are becoming less of a target audience, the opposite is true for others. One SID said this is "because they have become more accepting of our site as reliable" while for others it is driven by an increase in information, with one respondent even saying that some "reporters are using web info almost verbatim."

Overall, more respondents said that the target audience for their site has not changed. However, fans and the general public are becoming more prominent as they become more aware of the content available on the site and are more comfortable accessing it. In order to gain a general idea of the amount of traffic that passes through these sites, respondents were asked if their site has a counter to record the number of hits it receives. Just slightly less than half (47.3 percent) of the SIDs had counters on their site, as seen in table A-4, Appendix H.

For those that did have a counter, it is difficult to directly compare statistics because not all sites were launched at the same time, and it is more likely that sites that have been online longer will have more hits. However, the number of hits that a site has

received varied greatly. A couple of sites boasted astronomical numbers, such as 51,430,559 and 25 million. While many surpassed the one million mark, some did not even begin to approach it, providing figures such as 14,300 and 45,024.

Some of these fans search for added features such as live stats, videos, or audio streaming. The widespread use of the Internet can also be a factor, as one SID said, “Ten years ago the audience was very young, but as more and more people become comfortable with computers, our audience has grown.” Another opinion is that the audience has not necessarily changed, but the order in which people obtain information has. “Now, the website is usually the first stop to look up info,” the respondent added.

Whether the target audience has changed or not, the urgency for quick, up to the minute information has become apparent for most schools. Because the sites are of such importance to most Division I programs, they are updated frequently, with 61.7 percent of respondents saying that their site is updated more than two times a day, as seen in table 3. However, this number is actually higher given that some of the responses for the “other” category also fall into this distinction, such as “3-4 times a day,” “all day,” and “continuously.” A popular answer here was “as often as needed.” Only one SID said that his/her site is only updated once a week.

Table 3: Frequency of Web site being updated

Frequency	Number of responses	Percent of responses
More than 2 times a day	71	61.7%
Twice a day	9	7.8%
Once a day	17	14.8%
Once a week	1	0.9%
Other	17	14.8%

Despite the fact that almost all of the sites are updated at least once a day, 17.5 percent of respondents felt this was not often enough, as seen in table A-5, Appendix H. The most common restrictions that prevent the site from being updated more often were overwhelmingly a lack of time and personnel. This sentiment was especially strong from respondents who serve as the only person in their school's sports information department. One respondent said, "I am the only sports information director at the university so I would say that not enough time would be a valid answer," while another said, "Our entire SID staff consists of ONE – I repeat, one full-time person for 16 sports."

Another SID who also cited a shortage of support staff recognized the impact that having a larger staff would have on the Web site, saying, "We could have someone changing things every day and our hits would probably rise after the audience was trained to know it would be a constant flow of information." Others realize the value of posting and updating the most important information first, then handling excess projects if time permits, such as the SID who said, "With a two-person staff and no other help (no interns or students) there is only a limited amount of time that can be spent on projects with the Web other than the regular maintenance." Another respondent said, "You really need a full-time person to do just Web if you want to have everything updated. It isn't difficult to do just releases, stats, etc., but to put up head shots, new bios, alumni info, directions, fundraisers, etc. can be time consuming."

Another SID agreed that a full-time person would be the best solution, but is unrealistic due to budgetary constraints, saying, "We should have a full time editor who moves and posts stories throughout the day, but like everything else, that costs money." One respondent addressed another issue that sometimes prevents the site from being

updated more often: other schools not sending results or information quick enough to get it posted on the site. In general, respondents voiced a frustration at not having the time or staff to make changes on the Web site as often as they are needed.

While many people recognize the need for a full-time employee to maintain the Web site, that duty in most offices falls to the sports information director or the entire sports information staff. Only 6.4 percent of respondents currently have someone working full-time on the site, as seen in table 4. Many of the 47.3 percent who responded “other” specified that it is the responsibility of all staff members in the sports information department while some said that each person is delegated to cover a specific sport or area of the site. The SID is primarily responsible 35.5 percent of the time. Overall, the duty is often delegated to someone already in the department, adding that task to the others already required of that person’s position. Only one respondent (0.9 percent) works for a school that employs an outside company.

Table 4: Responsibility for updating Web site

Person responsible	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Other	52	47.3%
I am	39	35.5%
An assistant sports information director	9	8.2%
A full-time employee in the athletics department	7	6.4%
An office intern or graduate assistant	2	1.8%
An outside company	1	0.9%

Table 5: Extra work created for sports information director

Hours of work	Number of responses	Percent of responses
2 hours or more per week	86	74.1%
Between 1 and 2 hours per week	22	19%
Less than 1 hour per week	4	3.4%
No extra work	4	3.4%

Therefore, this responsibility of maintaining the Web site translates into extra work for most sports information directors, with 74.1 percent saying that it adds two hours or more per week, as seen in table 5. For some SIDs, this extra work is simply added onto what is already expected of the position. For others, it replaces other tasks that previously would have received more attention, such as writing features on athletes. One respondent said, “My time is distributed differently, and I must now learn/possess skills I did not need before, such as Photoshop and html language. Much of the time I used to spend working on things like feature stories is now spent on the Web site.”

It was found that 12.3 percent of respondents work in a department where a position has been created for Web personnel, as seen in table A-6, Appendix H. Of those 14 respondents, 57.1 percent said that the position was created two years ago or more (as seen in table A-7, Appendix H), showing that the hiring of Web personnel is not a recent practice and was actually adopted by a handful of schools early on. This, however, does not mean that it is a procedure that will become commonplace in college athletics. Most respondents (88.9 percent) said there is no plan to create a position for Web personnel in their department, as seen in table A-8, Appendix H.

Table 6: Trend toward hiring Web personnel

Prediction	Number of responses	Percent of responses
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Yes	65	55.6%
No	31	26.5%
Not sure	21	17.9%

While only 6.4 percent of respondents currently have a full-time person within their department whose sole responsibility is the maintenance of the school's official athletic Web site, more than half (55.6 percent) foresee this as a growing trend in the future. Another 17.9 percent are unsure of what will happen, as seen in table 6.

Several respondents said that more departments will employ Web personnel in the future out of necessity. One SID said that these Web sites are the future, and expanded on that belief by making a bold prediction, saying, "I expect that within the next five years media guides will be obsolete and everyone will get information from college websites and there will be a greater necessity to get information up quicker." Another person said, "Eventually, all schools will have to have professionally done web sites to keep up," while another expressed the belief that "The sites are becoming too multi-faceted to simply be added to an existing job description."

But for the 26.5 percent who do not envision this as the movement of the future, most believe that is exactly what will be done: the duty will remain the responsibility of the SID or someone else already employed by the department. One main reason is once again budgetary restrictions, as expressed by the individual who said, "It's needed, but budgets will always stand in the way when you can get something done out of the people you already have." One SID said, "Budgets are shrinking, not growing," while one said simply, "colleges are cheap."

A number of respondents expressed the belief that hiring Web personnel may be feasible for the larger athletic programs, but not the smaller ones, with one of the reasons being the aforementioned budget restrictions. One SID said, “Depends on the size of the school ... big BCS schools that can afford them already have them ... the small schools that need them, can’t afford them.” A difference may be present among the various levels of Division I, as one SID commented, “At the I-AA and I-AAA levels, the budget will not allow for the creation of a position solely to create and maintain an athletics department Web site.” But while smaller schools may not have the money to hire a full-time person to run the Web site, others believe that the lack of growth toward this may be because those schools that would be interested in pursuing this option have already done so.

The overall effect on the job of sports information director

The division of feelings over the future role of Web personnel is mirrored in the sentiments about how an individual’s job has changed as a result of official college athletic Web sites. For some, the effect has been positive, as one SID mentioned that while there is more content to update, it is also easier to answer questions because people can be directed to the Web site, which cuts down on the number of phone calls. Another respondent echoed this thought, pointing out that it makes it easier to deal with both the media and fans. For some, the presence of the Web site means an elimination of a lot of faxing or e-mailing, and “hours that used to be spent stuffing envelopes and mailing are now spent on the immediate.”

But while the job has improved for some, the Web site has simply equated into a heavier workload and added stress for others. One SID said that, “we spend probably 10-

15 hours per week on the website ... difficult challenge considering we did not add any personnel so we either work more ... or do less!" while another said, "It has created a great deal of stress related to balancing the desire to keep up with other schools, give the athletes and teams the attention they deserve and also do the other things an SID is required to do."

Several respondents discussed the fact that the site has effectively made it necessary for an SID to be available at any time, stressing the need to be attentive to Web site updates 24 hours a day. One respondent said, "it forces us to be on hand at all hours of nights and weekends to update with results from away contests. The site inevitably has grown to the point where it needs editing and updating multiple times a day." Another SID acknowledged the improved ability to promote and market athletic teams, but also that it has now "increased workload roughly 20% overall and more than doubled the amount of time put in on the job outside of regular office hours."

Along with the constant need to monitor the site's content, some SIDs are also feeling the increased pressure to have immediate results and information available on the site. One SID said that having the site means "more work and higher expectations of it being up on the web site and almost immediately after it is done. Greater demand from all parties." Another similar response was, "It has made the immediacy of information even more prominent. People cannot wait for the site to be updated, and if it is not updated within an hour of a game being completed, we hear about it." In order to emphasize this need for a quick turnaround, one SID said, "Used to be deadlines for news and newspapers, now if a tennis match is over at 1:30 p.m. results better be online by 1:32 p.m." For some sports information directors, pressure is coming to update information

that is not necessarily even timely. “I had tennis and track parents complaining their student-athlete bios were not on the web site when our school year began in September,” one SID said, “and their seasons do not officially begin until next semester.” And for one SID, the sentiment is clear, saying it has “increased the demands 1,000-fold; really, it’s become an albatross.”

Several respondents appear to have a love-hate relationship with their Web site, recognizing it has value but is simultaneously cumbersome. A prime example is the statement that “The web site has made it easier to spread the word about our sports. However, it has meant more time and energy in providing the information.” A more detailed situation was given by the SID who said, “Sports which were only publicized in a weekly release now have detailed up to the minute coverage. Sports which were publicized regularly are now publicized constantly.” But the drawback is that “interaction with media, opponents, conference, fans, and alumni have become less personal.” It has, in at least one case, also made the workplace a little less inviting for the SID who said, “While the sites are a great benefit, it has really made the office a more difficult place to work. In our business you don’t expect 40 hour work weeks, but the web has just added to the amount of work.”

In some instances, the Web site has not necessarily changed the sports information director’s job, but rather the way he/she works. The advances in technology have meant that the job is still about providing information, but now in a different format. A few respondents expressed the belief that it has become the number one source of information, moving people away from the fax machine and into an electronic field. One SID said, “We now gear live stats, web broadcasts and everything we can think of to

service our audiences through our website. It comes first. Everything else is next in line in terms of priorities.”

Overall, it is impossible to categorize the effect as either positive or negative because the feelings are so divided. Much of this depends on an SID’s budget and staff size, and therefore how much of the workload he/she is directly responsible for handling. What can be said is that official athletic Web sites do have an effect on the sports information director position. This is apparent from the interest in the topic and the solid response rate as well as the respondents’ willingness to speak candidly about their experiences and views on the subject.

Appendix H

Tables

Table A-1: Total school enrollment

Enrollment	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Less than 5,000	25	22.5%
5,000 – 10,000	27	24.3%
10,001 – 15,000	18	16.2%
15,001 – 20,000	15	13.5%
More than 20,000	26	23.4%

Table A-2: Public or private institution

Public or private	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Public	68	60.7%
Private	44	39.3%

Table A-3: Presence of official athletic Web site

Web site	Number of responses	Percent of responses
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Yes	110	99.1%
No	1	0.9%

Table A-4: Presence of a counter on Web site

Counter	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Yes	52	47.3%
No	58	52.7%

Table A-5: Is site updated often enough?

Updated enough	Number of responses	Percent of responses
Yes	94	82.5
No	20	17.5

Table A-6: Creation of a position for the sole purpose of maintaining site

Position created	Number of responses	Percent of responses
No	98	86%
Yes	14	12.3%
Not sure	2	1.8%

Table A-7: When position was created

When created	Number of responses	Percent of responses
2 years ago or more	8	57.1%
More than 1 year ago, but less than 2 years ago	2	14.3%
6 months to 1 year ago	2	14.3%
Less than 6 months ago	2	14.3%

Table A-8: Plans to create a position for Web maintenance

Plans to create position	Number of responses	Percent of responses
No	96	88.9%
Not sure	7	6.5%
Yes	5	4.6%