Digital media could boost smaller sports

Sport is a key driver of interactivity, says sports and technology expert

by Kirsten Sparre

Digital media in the form of broadband, mobile phones and interactive television are paving the way for spinning even more money on sports. Sports made rich by selling television rights will continue to benefit, but also sports with a much smaller audience can make money in the digital future, predicts Rachael Church-Sanders.

Church-Sanders has been a consultant with the Sport Business Group since the group bought up the successful newsletter, Sport and Technology, she edited for five years. She is a keen observer of how technology impacts on sport and gives advice to technology companies that want to invest in sport as a genre.

“Sport is a key driver of interactivity. Sport has lots and lots of content and many opportunities for the audience to participate. You can personalise viewing experiences, and you can build communities for people discussing what is happening in their sport. There is also a phenomenal amount of betting and purchasing opportunities going on online,” Church-Sanders told delegates at Play the Game.

Content for diehard fans

Digital media offer a wealth of opportunities to draw in audience groups and tailor products they may want to pay for.

“There is so much content out there. If you look at sports like golf and tennis, they show only a small percentage of their events on television. So there is lot of contents that can be pushed out on mobile devices and the Internet for diehard fans or even fans of a particular athlete,” Church-Sanders said.

The Internet can reach territories and communities that are not served by other media. A sport, such as boxing, may be popular in one part of the world, but a niche sport in another. So boxing fans that cannot go to the fights, can log on – maybe for a price – and see what is going on.

Fantasy gaming is also extremely popular, and many sports could offer this opportunity for a charge or have branding within the game paid for by advertisers and sponsors. Similarly, virtual worlds like Second Life can be a platform for sports events.

Web television is cheap

Church-Sanders pointed out that the digital media are particularly interesting to explore for smaller sports that do no get a chance to showcase their events on national or international television.

“Television on the web is cheap. It is up to ten times cheaper to produce than traditional television, so you can literally have a man or a woman with a camera at the local stadium producing stuff for immediate consumption,” Church-Sanders said.

Some sports are already using the Internet to bypass traditional media.

“The International Sailing Federation is about to launch its new website, and it will be the only way for sailing fans to learn results of certain events, because the federation will no longer give results to broadcasters,” Church-Sanders said.

Watch out for users

For those who own the rights to sport events, opportunities and threats stem from the same phenomenon: user-generated websites where fans produce and publish their own contents from the sport event.

“Rights owners who do not protect themselves, can lose a lot of revenue from user-generated websites. But there is also a massive potential to build communities around your sport, particularly if you are smaller sport. What better way to encourage people who are viewers or participants, to give you content which you can mould if you like or put out there as it is to help you grow your sports globally,” Church-Sanders asked.

“I commend Play the Game and host nation Iceland for convening such an important event. Without doubt the two biggest issues confronting sport are governance (or lack of it) and doping (the widespread use of).” Robin Parisotto, Research Consultant and Contractor, Australia.