



Women and Their Worth: Growth and Opportunity in Women’s Professional Sports

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Abstract

The presentation *Women and Their Worth: Growth and Opportunity in Women’s Professional Sports* examines the increasing potential for new marketing opportunities that will arise from leagues like the National Women’s Soccer League and the Women’s National Basketball Association. There is a growing fan base, and women’s sports will only continue to expand. By analyzing the current climate in this industry, this presentation will critique already existing deals and suggest how growth will best be achieved in the future. Viewership numbers, ticket sales, and other markers are used to support suggestions.

In 2020, the NWSL broke its viewership records by 300 percent along with enjoying a 152 percent increase in social mentions year-over-year and a 55 percent bump in traditional media mentions from 2019 to 2020. Looking at the WNBA, the Chicago Sky saw a sold-out arena of 10,387 fans for the third game of their Finals series against the Phoenix Mercury. Women’s sports have dedicated fans, and they are bringing in new supporters every day.

In order to facilitate exponential growth and convince investors to bring leagues to the next level, women’s sports leagues need to invest in proper merchandising and product availability, promote league visibility, and negotiate for better broadcast and media deals. Taking the necessary steps to improve results and deals in these categories will drive women’s professional sports to new heights.

Introduction

Vibrant. Determined. Winners. When looking at a box of Wheaties, the “Breakfast of Champions,” who can consumers expect to see? In front of them will be athletes at the top of their game. Brands and companies have partnered with athletes as long as it has been profitable to do so, and over the last decade, more and more women have lent their likenesses and talents to them. Women’s professional sports leagues have flourished in the past decade, and with this growth, there is an increasing potential for new marketing opportunities and partnerships. There is a growing fan base that can be exploited and sold to, and with more opportunities arising in women’s professional sports, brands can and will capitalize on this.

Experimental

In order to show the potential in women’s professional sports leagues, attendance and fan bases, viewership numbers, broadcast and media deals, and current sponsors were analyzed. For example, the Chicago Sky saw a sold out crowd of 10,387 fans at Wintrust Arena for Game 3 of the WNBA Finals. The 2020 NWSL Challenge Cup drew 653,000 viewers, which is comparable to either a Major League Baseball game shown on the network TBS in the same time slot or an English Premier League soccer match airing the same week.

Results and Discussion

Looking at growing women’s sports leagues as a whole, merchandising and visibility need to be addressed. Women’s professional leagues need to make sure fans have opportunities to purchase branded merchandise, and they have to focus on forming relationships with retailers. Changing the visibility of products is important, because it raises the overall visibility of the leagues as well, and that drives interest. An example of this being implemented can be found in the WNBA. As of September of 2021, as part of a new partnership with Dick’s Sporting Goods, “licensed WNBA merchandise will now be available for the first time in at least 100-120 of its stores” (Thompson and Voepel). Dick’s Sporting Goods entered this partnership because they believe in the vision of Cathy Engelbert, the WNBA commissioner, to drive change and bring increased visibility to women in sports.

The other biggest challenge for women’s professional sports is seen in unequal media coverage and broadcast deals. While nearly every major men’s sport struggled to retain viewers in 2020 and 2021, the NWSL and WNBA both saw increases in viewership. These numbers rose due to more exposure on cable and broadcast television.

Results and Discussion (cont.)

There is an interest in women’s sports, and this can be linked to the improvement of the infrastructure around women’s sports and the cost of entry to stream and broadcast women’s sports. The cost of entry “remains relatively low, even as the value of live content in a fracturing media landscape grows” (Strauss and Hensely-Clancy). Also, many of the players already come with a reputation and fanbase due to their own marketing efforts on social media platforms, which adds to viability in the eyes of advertisers

In order to grow exponentially in the coming years, women’s professional sports leagues need to keep a steady stream of new business deals, which includes media and broadcast deals. The exposure will allow leagues to expand their fan bases and reach, and they need to push for equal coverage in deals as opposed to being relegated to online only streams or side channels like ESPN2.

Overall, women have a place in the professional sports world. For many years, they have been dismissed or not taken seriously as competitors. But in the last decade, people are taking notice of the opportunities women’s leagues can offer, and the market and demand will only continue to grow as more corporations invest in something bigger than themselves.

League	Strategy	Who would implement?	How would this be implemented?	Expected impact	Measuring success
NWSL					
	Increase availability of merchandise	Team merchandising and production departments/outourced manufacturers, Marketing VPs	Teams would need to invest in manufacturing branded goods and partner with regional sellers to make them available to fans.	This could increase that particular revenue stream for teams.	Seeing increased sales numbers of merchandise would measure if this is successful.
WNBA					
	Negotiate for higher media rights fees	Cathy Engelbert, Terri Jackson (WNBPA executive director), Finance and Media departments	This would be implemented by meeting with broadcasting partners and laying out the data to prove their deals should have increased value based on growth.	This would raise revenue streams for the league and increase viewership.	The effects could be seen in viewership numbers from year to year and in the financial statements regarding revenue from the deals.

Figure 1. Strategy Chart: Women’s Professional Sports Leagues

Acknowledgements & References

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