

A Lesson in Social Media Marketing from a German Bundesliga Football Team

The Ugly Duckling

Bayer Leverkusen aren't exactly what you'd call a 'glamorous' football team. Chances are you've never even heard of them. They've never been domestic champions (although they've been runners-up a few times), they've only ever won the German equivalent of the FA Cup once, and their forays into Europe have seen them win the Europa Cup just once with a handful of runners-up positions.

'Runner-up' kind of sums them up as a club. They're 'might-haves', 'could've-beens', 'forever the bridesmaid, never the bride'. They're not even particularly popular amongst their Teutonic football family. Founded in 1904 by workers at the Bayer AG pharmaceutical company in Leverkusen (the company from where their name is derived and who own them to this day), they are accused by rivals of being a 'plastic club'. A plaything for wealthy corporate owners, devoid of tradition and a committed fan-base. Altogether then, an unremarkable club. However, in one respect, this unremarkable club are doing something quite remarkable. They are taking social media by storm. And in doing so they are providing some useful tips for businesses of all types to emulate, as well as proving how potent a tool well-managed social media accounts can be.

The Power of Social Media

In case you haven't been watching, social media and the way it is used has changed quite a bit in the last few years. Sure, there's still an endless stream of baby pictures, plates of food, commentary on gym work-outs, and more selfies than you can shake a selfie-stick at, but businesses are now much more involved. A quick look through some of the stats for 2016 shows why and to what extent:

- There are now 2.3 billion active social media users
- Social media users have risen by 176 million in the last year
- 1 million new active mobile social users are added every day - that's 12 *each second*
- There are 400 million Monthly Active Users on Instagram
- 500 million people visit Twitter each month without logging in

- 91% of retail brands use 2 or more social media channels
- 65.8% of US companies with 100+ employees use Twitter for marketing

- 64% of Twitter users and 51% of Facebook users are more likely to buy the products of brands they follow online
- 50% of shoppers have made a purchase based on a recommendation through a social media network

Social media is simply massive. The opportunities to communicate brand for little or no cost is unparalleled, and as the figures show; businesses are taking advantage. However, just having a social media presence isn't enough. As the saying goes; it's not what you've got, it's what you do with it. And on that blush-inducing note, we return to our friends in Leverkusen.

How Bayer 04 are Becoming Social Media Kings with Help from a 'Little Pea'

With their popularity stakes rooted near ground level, Bayer Leverkusen had been trying to improve their image in any way they could. They transformed their ground into one of the most family-friendly in Germany, their 'Ultras' fan group was supported by the club to help generate better atmospheres at home games. They even took ownership of the insults thrown at them for their corporate, pharmaceutical ties and history, recently self-identifying as the 'Pillendreher', or 'Tablet Twisters'.

Things really changed, especially on social media, when on August 31st, 2015 they signed Mexican striker Javier Hernández for a fee of around £7.3m. Hernández is better known as *Chicharito*, a name he wears on his shirt and which translates to 'Little Pea'. His signing was a shrewd move. Not only is he a very capable striker, scoring 26 in all competitions in the 15/16 season, he is also wildly popular on social media pushing nearly 11 million followers on Twitter and Instagram combined. The bulk of his fan-base comes from North and South America and his popularity across the platforms and across the continents gave the Tablet Twisters an idea.

They began diversifying their social media presence by firstly setting up separate accounts on Twitter that tweeted in English and Spanish, as well as German. They set up a separate Facebook account that shared content in English, they started taking Instagram seriously, and even started using temporary video and picture sharing platform Snapchat. The results were formidable. Over the course of the year, over one and a half million new fans made their way onto one of Bayer 04's social media platforms making them the third fastest growing football club in Europe. On Instagram alone, they saw a growth figure of around 390%, whilst Twitter grew by 188%, and Facebook by 81%. Their Snapchat account is the most popular of every German team in the Bundesliga.

It isn't just sharing in different languages though that continues to bring them such success. It's the way they do it. As Jochen Rotthaus, the club's Director of Marketing and Communication explains; *"We work with local agencies that help us understand the local cultures and expectations, to refine our strategy and produce content and conversations that fans will be most interested in... We want to reach new fans by creating emotions and develop a long-term relationship with them and our club. Another great thing with social media: you get immediate feedback, and can learn and capitalise on successful campaigns and social trends very quickly. For example, our #MayThe4th original artwork, inspired by Star Wars, recorded 1.2 million impressions!"*

Bayer Leverkusen don't just share content for the sake of it. They have taken the time to understand what content the different groups within their diverse fan-base want to see, and how they want it communicating. They take the time to engage with fans, to learn what they like and what they don't. They carefully monitor contemporary trends and base marketing campaigns around them. They have fun with it as well. On September 14th 2016 during a Champions League game at home to CSKA Moscow, they cheekily trolled the Tottenham Hotspur Twitter account regarding their respective positions in their group. Unfortunately, this time it back-fired when a few goals later and the squeal of a final whistle, they had swapped positions. They later deleted the tweet.

What Does the Tale of the Tablet Twisters Teach us?

The overwhelming majority of businesses have a social media presence these days and in a crowded place, the key is to stand out. The uncomfortable truth is that a lot of corporate social media accounts are quite simply boring. Endlessly churning out articles and self-congratulatory content that sees little in the way of engagement. If a return on social media output is what's intended, then social media Managers need to go that one step further. It's hard work figuring out what your clients want to see, how they want to see it, and to engage and interact with them across multiple channels but the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Yes, they had help from a diminutive, charismatic and prolific Mexican striker, Bayer Leverkusen caught a break with that one, but what followed and how they capitalised on their new-found exposure was all their own work.

Some may be sceptical as to the power of a carefully thought out and well managed social media strategy, but if doubts creep in, remember Bayer Leverkusen. The unpopular, unfashionable Tablet Twisters who went from obscurity during the summer of 2015 to being, two summers later, the club most likely to be crowned the fastest growing in Europe.