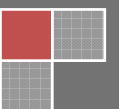


Modular Media for Sports Marketers

A guide to evaluate the importance of having a modular content strategy for entertainment brands, and a tool to evaluate leading modular content platforms like widgets, RSS, and Vortexes.

The Real Time Matrix Corporation
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INTRODUCTION

This whitepaper is intended for marketing or advertising professionals in the sports industry who have heard about “modular media technologies” (e.g., widgets, RSS, and Vortexes) and wants to learn more about how they can be effectively deployed in a strategic marketing program. After reading the white paper, you will have a solid understanding of the consumer trends behind Web content portability, the benefits and drawbacks of various portable Web technologies, and the knowledge foundation for developing a strategic approach to pursuing Web content portability for your sports brand.

THE MODULAR MEDIA PHENOMENON

Perhaps the largest and most significant digital trend today is the phenomenon of modular personal content. It is absolutely the critical underpinning of the biggest news in the digital space. Consider:

- **The key 2.0 platforms are built on the appeal of modular personal content (blogging, user generated video (UGC video), social networking, microblogging, and photo sharing.)**
- **Personal homepages like My Yahoo! and iGoogle are fast becoming the preferred starting point for users to access the web. Said Marissa Mayer, VP of Search Product and User Experience at Google, “The Google personal homepage is the fastest growing Google product. This market is going to be very large.”**
- **7 of the top 10 largest sites are either totally reliant on modular personal content for their success (FaceBook, MySpace, YouTube) or have modular personal content as a lynchpin of their future business strategies (Google, Yahoo!, Windows Live, and MSN.)**
- **All of the leading Internet players (Microsoft, Apple, Yahoo!, Google) are committed to developing new and more powerful uses of modular personal content.**

All of these initiatives have resulted in an explosion of new “lean forward” web real estate. Consumers are demonstrating a deep preference for this type of content, as is evidenced by the tremendous amount of time they spend in places like personal pages and social networks. The challenge for sports marketers, however, is that the consumer is truly in control of what he sees in these environments. Getting a place at this personal content table for your sports property requires you to truly add value to consumer experience.

About six months ago, the widget really grew to be touted as a ready solution for marketers to capitalize on this phenomenon. By giving consumers a way to make some types of web content portable, it was believed that widgets had the power to transform consumer behavior, and with it consumer marketing.

No one disputes that widgets have had enormous impact. With household penetration of widgets at over 50%, it is clear that consumers are integrating these units into their daily lives.

But it is also clear that widgets are only a part of the modular content opportunity. The category of widgets includes many “content light” offerings that can make the genre seem toy-like. Toys are great for some things, but for many purposes consumers demand high quality experiences that can’t be delivered by admittedly popular items like the Fun Wall Facebook widget-application.

RSS feeds and readers are another form of modular personal content. As is Real Time Matrix’s Vortex™, a modular communications platform that sports brands and publishers can use to deliver real time content to consumers that helps build brands through deep engagement. What widgets and RSS and Vortexes do is different, but they each help to deliver on what consumers want and expect: content on their terms.

In this new era, consumers have ultimate control over the modules of content they select, so sports brands need to create modular experiences that they will welcome. And sports marketers need to ensure that the modular content brand experiences they develop deliver the sort of high quality impression needed to further their objectives. The user interfaces of their modular units need to be rich, satisfying, and inviting. Far too often, options in the widget space have been more like flash-in-the-pan gadgets than deep brand experiences.

So widgets, RSS, and Vortexes offer different “flavors” of modular content and have different purposes and strengths. If you’ve decided that modular content is a priority for your brand (as it clearly should be) you also need to pick the right platform from among these three. This white paper is intended to help you do just that.

Strategic Considerations

As a sports brand you are of course in the content business. Delivering content for your brand is far easier than for a packaged goods brand, for example, because you have a ready supply of high appeal sports content to deliver. You can also work with your partners to deliver their content if you so desire. A modular media presence can help you add value in such situations, and generate incremental revenue in so doing.

Real Time Matrix introduced Vortex to maximize the opportunity to deliver diverse forms of content. Vortex offers a 100% customizable unit with high production values and the versatility to offer video, audio and text seamlessly. It provides a high-quality environment to feature the best of what you have to offer.

Vortex provides a high-quality environment to feature what you have to offer.

Widgets and RSS can also offer such an opportunity, depending on how they are designed.

Other Critical Issues

There are several other issues to consider when making the decision on which modular media platform to deploy in service of your brand:

Control

Just as it is imperative to ensure that your advertising, programs, collateral etc. accurately reflect your sports brand’s visual language and messaging, your platform should also offer a physical appearance that is brand enhancing. Unfortunately many of the consumer widgets that are currently available are rather unattractive and would seem to violate the brand standards of the companies that commission them.

An additional control issue is being able to ensure that your application does not accidentally feature content that your consumers may find objectionable, or that you may find detrimental to the brand. For example, suppose you are leveraging a viral strategy. It may be in your best interests to offer consumers access to user generated content in your modular media unit. But some user generated content may be inappropriate. A strong platform should give you just as much power over what not to feature as it does in defining what you want featured.

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Finally, many sports brands are concerned that their unit might be featured in untoward areas of the Web. Websites with objectionable language and erotic content, for example, are generally not the sorts of places where most sports brands want their messages to appear. Before you make the decision on a platform to represent your property, you should determine what safeguards if any are available to protect your brand from appearing on inappropriate websites.

Personalization

As we said at the beginning of this white paper, and as has been widely reported in virtually every trade journal, consumers want “what they want when they want it how they want it.” We no longer operate in an environment where a brand can broadcast the message that it wants and essentially require that consumers see it. The days of burning a message into consumer brains are over. We need to recognize that any modular media application needs to meet consumer needs first, or your target simply won't grab it.

But what does that mean in the context of a branded modular media platform? It means that consumers should be able to customize the content that they receive, without detracting from the marketing value of the unit. For example, certain users may want to learn more about one of your players. Allowing them to do this will make your unit more valuable to them. Unfortunately very few brand widget suppliers have developed a way to deal with that challenge.

Stickiness/Longevity

The stickiness of a modular media application is also a very important consideration as you make your plans. Unfortunately, many widgets and feeds demonstrate very short shelf life with consumers. People sign up, but quickly lose interest and take them off their Web presences.

Of course, if you are building a unit that is designed solely to hold consumer attention for the few weeks before a big game, this is less of an issue. But you may be missing an opportunity to drive greater consumer interest with such a short term strategy. Hard core fans will want modular content that is relevant over the long haul. By giving them a way of learning over a longer period of time, or by creating a unit focused on a franchise rather than a single game or season, you may be able to greatly expand consumer interest. To demonstrate with an iconic example, it would probably on the annual Texas/Oklahoma game. Naturally such a unit would be loaded with info about the big game at the appropriate time, but the unit itself should live on to build loyalty and provide a readymade audience for every game and every season.

Still another consideration is striking a balance between functionality and graphical intrusiveness. Certainly, an innovative design or delivery mechanism may capture consumer attention at the outset. But if these design elements impede delivery of valuable content, you may find that consumers lose interest in your application. To take extreme example, imagine a boxer's unit that looked like a boxing glove. The novelty of such a widget might make people more likely to take it and put it in their Web presences. But over the long haul, if the widget design has placed form over function, it's unlikely that consumers will continue to use such an app. The

demographics and psychographics of your target are an important consideration here. What a Tween boy wants on his site is likely quite different from what a committed boxing fan wants on his.

Social Media

There are many modular platforms that can “get you into social media.” But in order to assess their value on this dimension, you must consider what “get you into social media” means. There is a big difference between a modular content unit simply being able to function in a social media environment and one that really leverages and capitalizes on the communicative nature of these environments.

Shawn Sires, COO of Real Time Matrix, likens the distinction to being in a bar.

“Many widgets and modular media platforms simply enable you to stick them on a page in a social network. They’re like beer signs in a pub. What most brands want and need is a way to participate in the social nature of the medium – like being a person in the pub. People can talk to, connect with, and persuade other pub goers. Pub signs just sit there. They may drive awareness, but most brands have meatier social media objectives than that.”

In short, if your objectives for social media go beyond simple awareness building, you need a modular platform that actively leverages the social media space to help you engage people.

CHOOSING A MODULAR MEDIA PLATFORM RIGHT FOR YOUR BRAND

Different brands have different needs, and the ideal platform for one sports brand will likely differ from the best one for another. The next section evaluates each of the major modular media platforms: RSS, widgets, and Vortex.

RSS



This is an example of an RSS feed on MyYahoo!.com, one of the most popular venues that offers a comprehensive listing of RSS feeds.

Strengths

Creating an RSS feed is very easy for consumers. So easy that thousands of consumers do it every day, whether for their Facebook page or their MyYahoo! homepage. An RSS feed can be taken virtually anywhere and rests on proven search technologies. Since there are already lots of off-the-shelf RSS feed readers, there are few if any logistical issues in distribution. Further, consumers can add your RSS feed to their existing RSS platforms in just a few simple steps. Developing an RSS feed is an extremely low-cost marketing tactic as well.

Weaknesses

The most obvious weakness of RSS to most sports marketers is that an RSS reader tends not to be a terribly attractive or aesthetically pleasing platform on which to build a brand image. It's unlikely that you have any control over the look and feel of the user's reader. In many environments, the readers themselves are deliberately designed to be "background." The customizing functions of a My Yahoo! page are an excellent example of this.

You may (or may not) find that RSS cannot realistically reach a true cross-section of your consumers.

Finally, the role that RSS can play in social media is quite finite. Users can certainly add RSS feeds to their social media presences – be they profile pages, blogs, vlogs, etc. They are, however, one way communications tools. They deliver content to the user, but don't facilitate engagement with other users or brands.

Widgets



This is the Weather Channel weather widget. This widget was among the first to really catch on among a broad range of consumers. It continues to be among the most popular today – a testament to its ease of use.

Strengths

The category of widgets is so broad that there are likely several suppliers that can provide you with units that will meet basic brand information dissemination goals. Companies like Slide, Clearspring, RockYou, and SpringWidgets have all grown rapidly and together offer a range of widget options for your consideration as marketing vehicles. If you're looking for an executionally novel or peculiar application, widgets are probably a good bet.

Many widgets are developed on a truly custom basis, with multi-week or multi-month development schedules during which you can help define executional features that you want. You need to pay close attention to ensure a high quality presentation, though.

If you're looking to get onto iGoogle, Netvibes or Windows Live, widgets are certainly a productive route. Millions of users are already comfortable with the idea of grabbing and placing widgets on their personal pages, so the learning curve for these consumers is fairly modest. Since these industry leaders are basing their consumer interface on widgets, social networks are also riding the trend, incorporating widgets or, like Facebook and Bebo, widget-applications.

A good widget developer will create a unit that is capable of being placed in a variety of social network environments, not just one. In today's Web environment, there is no need to create individual units for individual networks. Common standards are available to make your widgets more versatile.

Many widgets are built on RSS feeds. Essentially, they are customized RSS readers. Since RSS is a proven technology, you can be assured that your consumers will receive a solid brand experience.

If you're looking to advertise, some popular widgets feature graphical text or video advertisement placements that you can buy. Certain widget builders have created their own ad networks of the most popular widgets so that you can buy advertising across a number of units. This makes the process of buying widget advertising far more

convenient. However, you may find that your ad message is very much secondary to the primary message and function of the widget.

Weaknesses

While widgets have a number of strengths that have led to their rapid growth in the marketplace, there are also a few caveats that you should be cognizant of. You need to be aware that there are already thousands of widgets available to consumers. This should matter to you because any marketplace with 5,000 competitors is a challenging environment in which to drive awareness, trial, and stickiness. Not only are you competing with other sports widgets, you're also competing with widgets specifically designed by some of the largest Web publishing properties. Their goals mirror yours: building exposure, awareness, trial, and loyalty. This is not to say that it's impossible to create a widget that gets noticed, but rather that the marketplace does not operate like *The Field of Dreams*.

Another important consideration is social media. Many sports companies develop widgets as a way of gaining a presence in social networks. In our view, however, the brand needs to think about the larger context of all social media, not just Facebook and MySpace. There are strategic and practical reasons for this.

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Let's start with the practical. If you go to the webpage of a heavy user of Facebook, you may find that that person has stacked 4, 8, 12, even 20 different widgets on their homepage. This bank of widgets can extend down for screen after screen. Viewed in that context, it will be at challenge to drive quality exposure in such an environment. Another practical consideration is that while any social networking website has a hard-core user base that visits the site one or more times per day, millions of its members are less frequent visitors. They may be dividing their time across multiple social networks, or they may simply be too busy to maintain an active presence in these environments.

Strategically, the most important consideration is that social networks are not the only venues in which consumers build and expand social relationships. Thus, having a Facebook strategy does little to impact the many enormous blogger communities that are out there, for example.

You also need to consider your objectives for social media along with the capabilities of a potential widget platform. Can you get a meaningful social presence with the platform you are considering? Or is it really more an awareness tool only? In other words, does the potential widget platform make you a participant in the "pub" of social media, or just a beer sign?

Another major challenge with widgets can be development time. There are very few sports companies that have the luxury of building marketing vehicles months in advance. Companies that want to be in market very quickly may be hard-pressed to find an acceptable widget solution that can be built in time. Development schedules of six or more weeks are not unusual in the widget market. Part of the reason for this is that many widgets suppliers actually outsource the development of widgets to other companies.

Companies that want to be in market very quickly may be hard-pressed to find an acceptable widget solution that can be built in time.

Different widgets and widget suppliers vary on the extent to which they give brands ongoing control over their units. With a hodgepodge of suppliers, it's natural that some widget makers are better than others.

Finally, the issue of providing a quality presentation deserves another mention. Lots of widgets don't look good or function well. Given how prominent modular content can be on a consumer's page, this can be a major issue. Make very sure you are comfortable with the appearance and functionality of a widget before you deploy. When you are considering different widget suppliers, check out their past work. Does it ALL look good enough to represent your brand, or are some of their units ugly or klunky. If they are, you owe it to your brand to move on.

Vortex



This is an example of Real Time Matrix's Vortex product, specifically one of the Vortexes for Major League Soccer. The unit offers banner ads, video, and scrolling hyperlinks to thematic content, updated all day every day to reflect the latest news and information.

It won't surprise you that as the makers of Vortex, we believe that it has a number of excellent qualities. Part of the reason for this is that we developed Vortex after researching the strengths and weaknesses of the other modular media platforms.

Strengths

The starting point for Vortex development was ensuring that our platform could offer the basic strengths of widgets and RSS. But it had to do a lot more. Specifically:

1. **It has been designed to be 100% skinnable with brand imagery that strictly adheres to your guidelines.**
2. **Its patent-pending matching engine offers relevant content from the entire Web, rather than single RSS feeds that power most widgets. The result? Content that more accurately reflects the categories and themes that interest your consumers and will build your brand.**
3. **Vortexes consistently offer a consumer experience of the highest quality.**
4. **Vortex was designed to be easy for consumers to deploy. All they do is make two clicks to get a single line of HTML code that they use to add the Vortex to their social network pages, homepages, and blogs.**

5. It has been created to protect brands from being associated with objectionable content. With Vortex, you define the content it features as well as the content it won't. Vortexes can also be blocked from appearing on a set of objectionable websites that you define. This delivers a higher level of brand safety.
6. Vortex was designed to be easy to deploy. It is a turnkey solution prepared and delivered according to your specifications. We don't farm out the development to other companies. Vortexes were also designed to be deployable in a couple of days versus several weeks for some types of widgets.
7. Content can be changed on the fly. With Vortex, it is easy to update the look and brand graphics that the unit features. Once updated, the changes automatically deploy wherever the Vortex appears online.
8. Vortex can be an integral part of a social media strategy. Consumers can take Vortexes to their social network pages, blogs, vlogs, and many other venues. Vortex also offers a powerful Facebook deployment option that lets the brand skin the page around the Vortex, or sell the skinned real estate to partners. This deployment option gives you a powerful full page brand experience, and also facilitates engagement, conversation, and connection with and between consumers.

To be fair, it would also be possible to design a custom widget that offered many of these features. But our patent-pending matching engine is a Vortex exclusive, and to our knowledge, no widget supplier can come close to our deployment speed. Additionally, our Facebook skinning option gives the sports brand a unique opportunity to create a presence on that site of unprecedented power and impact.

To our knowledge, no widget supplier can come close to our deployment speed.

Another Vortex strength is its ability to allow consumers to personalize their units based upon their own interests. As a critical brand safeguard, however, the Vortex unit only displays customized content to that individual. Other consumers that encounter the Vortex will see only the content that meets the brand's selection criteria. This protects a brand from unexpected associations, while giving the consumer critical ways to customize for themselves. Custom content naturally makes the unit stickier and increases its shelf life but in a brand safe manner.

Weaknesses

Vortex is not for every brand. It is a robust communications platform designed to deliver well-defined multimedia content on an ongoing basis. If your target is very young – Children, Tweens, or Teens for example – you may find that a colorful custom widget may be more suited to your needs. A Vortex, while offering great graphical customization options, is designed to display substantive content first and foremost.

While some widgets are designed to offer a serious and professional appearance, many have toy-like qualities that make them more appropriate for young audiences and perhaps less relevant to other demographics. To take an extreme example, Vortex is not the best platform from which to have a defensive line leap out at the screen. Such action could be customized into a Vortex, but it isn't the point of this robust modular platform.

CONCLUSION

The sports marketing community supports thousands and thousands of different brands, and the business objectives of no two are exactly alike. So naturally, there is no one single solution for online content portability that will be best for all brands. We believe that our platform has unique strengths that will be valued by a broad swath of brands. But we also salute the individuals that pioneered RSS, and are impressed by some of the widgets developed by other companies.

We are also indebted to the individuals that pioneered social media and social networks. Our success in developing a meaningful way to create true dialogue and engagement in environments like Facebook is only possible because of the profound environmental changes and consumer empowerment that they are driving.

The decision as to which platform is appropriate for your particular business situation depends on your needs and objectives. We hope that this white paper provides additional insight into the modular media arena and the marketing options available to you.

Thanks for reading. For more information, contact us at info@realtimematrix.com.
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