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From Athlete to Influencer: Analyzing the Rise of Deion Sanders and the Power of Well Off Media

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ABSTRACT

How does an individual describe Coach Deion Sander's unconventional marketing approach's success in the traditional collegiate football world? Coach Sanders' strategy appears disruptive to the status quo. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Well Off Media, founded by Deion Sanders Jr., and its disruptive force in the realm of social influencers. Through various management tools, this business case study examines the strategic actions of Deion Sanders Jr. and his father, Deion Sanders, as they cultivate their brand and social influence. While there is a need for more academic information related to Coach Sanders, this research offers valuable insights into the path to success for future sports media influencers. This study is significant to scholars and practitioners, as it fills the gap in academic knowledge concerning Coach Deion Sanders as a social influencer and disruptive marketer, particularly within the context of collegiate coaching in football.

KEYWORDS: Social Influencing, Football, Culture, Coaching, Coach Prime, Disruptive, Marketing, Brand

INTRODUCTION

In social influencers, where new trends emerge and disrupt traditional marketing practices, an irresistible force is rising, challenging the status quo and reshaping the landscape of collegiate coaching. Enter Coach Deion Sanders, an enigmatic figure who transcends the boundaries of sports and media, spearheading a transformative journey as a social influencer. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Well Off Media, founded by Deion Sanders Jr., and its disruptive force in the realm of social influencers. Coach Sanders is the father of Deion Sanders Jr. and the current head coach of the Colorado Buffaloes (Colorado Buffaloes Wire, 2022). Through various management tools, this business case study examines the strategic actions of Deion Sanders Jr. and his father, Deion Sanders, as they cultivate their brand and social influence. The study delves into the social platforms utilized by Sanders, including YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, revealing a brand that is still in its growth stage with no signs of slowing down. By examining the rise of Sanders and the transformative effect on traditional coaching practices, this research contributes to the current understanding of social influencer marketing and opens avenues for further exploration.

METHOD(S)

The primary method for this research is case study analysis. Deion Sanders and Well-off Media have used social media platform expansion and content consistency to grow their brands. They have developed communities on several platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, to reach audiences across demographics. Additionally, being active and growing influence on several platforms requires the creation of various types of creative and consistent posts to maintain engagement. Utilizing videos, graphics, pictures, and well-timed relevant tweets has allowed Deion to make approachable and relevant content for viewers worldwide (Kamruzzaman, 2022, p. 2). Case study analysis is an ideal technique to better evaluate Coach Prime's marketing strategy. Case study analysis is an active, problem-based, student-centered, teacher-facilitated teaching strategy preferred in undergraduate programs to assist students in developing critical thinking skills (Seshan et al., 2021).

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Deion Sanders

Deion "Prime Time" Sanders is a sports phenomenon and business mogul. Sanders was an All-American football player at Florida State University. During his time in college, he also played baseball. Sanders astonishingly entered the National Football League and Major League Baseball drafts, embarking on a professional baseball career from 1989 to 2001 and a professional football career from 1989 to 2005. Deion Sanders is the only athlete to play in the Super Bowl and World Series. His impressive on-field skills and larger-



than-life personality led to numerous endorsements from brands such as Nike, Pepsi, Burger King, American Express, and Under Armour (Deion Sanders, 2021; Joel, 2023). After retiring from sports, Sanders worked as a television football analyst and, in 2008, starred in his reality television series. The series documented the lives of his family (Deion Sanders, 2021). In 2011, the Pro Football Hall of Fame and College Football Hall of Fame inducted Sanders (Joel, 2023).

Emboldened by the momentum of Colin Kaepernick's 2017 expulsion from the NFL, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020, and the rise in support of the Black Lives Matter movement athletes, sports enthusiasts, and the general public all became more cognizant of racial injustices in America (Khabbaz, 2021). Influenced by civil rights issues, Deion Sanders gave back to the community through his sports acumen. He moved from a high school football coach to the collegiate level.

On September 21, 2020, Deion Sanders was named the 21st head coach of Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. Jackson State University is a member of the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). Pro Football Hall of Famer Coach Sanders became absorbed at Jackson State University, the city of Jackson, and in HBCU culture. At his first press conference as head coach, Sanders stated,

First and foremost, God led me to Jackson State. That's what I can truly and honestly say. And these kids need the playing field leveled. I cannot wait for this opportunity. If you give us the resources, if you give us the same resources that these other schools have, we're going to prove that there is a highway that takes you from Jackson State all the way to the NFL. We're not just raising professional football players, we're raising professionals (Horka, 2020, p. 2).

Sanders said, "I truly believe with all of my heart and soul that God called me collect, and I had to accept the charges" (Keith, 2022, p, 2).

Sanders is a fierce supporter of additional exposure and creating a leveled playing field for all Historically Black Colleges and Universities (JSU Football, n.d.). He has regularly promoted opportunities highlighting talent in the SWAC and throughout the HBCU culture (JSU Football, n.d.). Since Sanders's hiring, Jackson State University's athletic department has generated the equivalency of \$185 million in advertising and exposure (Bell, 2021). Ashley Robinson, Jackson State University's Athletics Director, states, "Coach Prime was the biggest hire in football. I am talking about Power Five Level; he is the biggest hire in all of college football. There is no other Deion Sanders. I don't think there are enough zeros, he is worth a whole lot" (Keith, 2022, p, 3).

Sanders' personal views on the atrocities faced by African Americans in America added to his influence on others. Consumers are more likely to consume products, services, and content considered authentic whether or not they like the messenger. Therefore, highlighting the connection between authenticity and behavior (Nunes et al., 2021). Content viewers are likely to feel more comfortable following and trusting social media influencers because they feel a personal connection to them (Jung &Im, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020). Deion Sanders is considered a cultural tastemaker and social media influencer. Tastemakers are "people or institutions that shape the way others think, eat, listen, drink, dress, and more...they are media gatekeepers...tastemakers can have a huge influence" (Mass Media, 2019, p. 6).

Consumers are now more apt to challenge whether companies, universities, and celebrities are confronting injustices or just maintaining the existing state of affairs (Erickson, 2022). "Both consumers and employees want to see companies take a stand on social issues in ways that are consistent and aligned with their values, and they will see right through" (Erickson, 2022, para. 10). Sanders's influence and social media presence has heightened the recognition of HBCU culture and the Deion "Prime Time" Sanders' brand. Pepsi, American Airlines, and Proctor & Gamble are new sponsors for Jackson State University and the SWAC. SWAC Commissioner Charles McClelland stated "that the revenues for HBCU teams have increased since Sanders arrived at Jackson State. (Keith, 2022, p, 4).

Well Off Media

Deion Sanders Jr., son of Deion Sanders, is CEO of Well Off Media. Well Off Media chronicles the behind-the-scenes efforts of Deion Sanders while coaching at Jackson State University and now at the University of Colorado (Carlough, 2022). Sanders Jr. has significantly contributed to his father's influential surge on social media. Documenting Coach Sanders' recruiting efforts, family life, and meetings with celebrity friends, the coverage has dramatically increased Sanders' social media followings across various platforms (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Marketing experts agree that the transference of a social media influencer's characteristics onto their shared content significantly impacts followers' behaviors and attitudes toward the marketed brand (Schouten et al., 2020). Utilizing the free and accessible social platforms raises brand awareness for the college football team and coach while also increasing the amount of money donated to the programs and the coach's earnings. Sanders Jr.'s strategy is to flood the market with content (Bell, 2021). The strategy has worked.

Furthermore, Jackson State University reported the fourthhighest increase in social media engagements in the nation in 2022. Across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, JSU registered 1.46 million interactions, an increase of more than 1.1 million from the previous year (JSU Athletics, 2023). The extraordinary rise was the highest of all FCS schools in 2022 (JSU Athletics, 2023).



Subscriptions to Sanders Jr.'s Well Off Media YouTube channel soared from 80,000 to nearly 250,000 when Sanders Sr. began as head coach at Jackson State (Well Off Media, 2023). Coach Sanders' video of his first team meeting at the University of Colorado received 4.2 million views (Schrotenboer, 2023). According to Jim Cavale, founder of INFLCR, a content software platform used by athletes to build their social media presence, "The total aggregate following for the Colorado football program's individual and team social media accounts also has increased by 500% since Sanders' hiring at CU in early December" (Schrotenboer, 2023, para. 5). More followers and views results in increased interest from fans, businesses, and recruits (Schrotenboer, 2023).

Well Off Media's "flood the market" approach has raised the value of the Deion "Prime Time" Sanders' brand. The shared content conveys authentic opinions and situations, adding value to the brand and enticing followers to purchase and consume the endorsed brand, generating social media engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Liadeli et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disruptive marketing in the increasingly digital world we exist in is constantly changing but the one consistent is that quality content to the right viewer is king. This means you must have enjoyable and consistent content to keep your viewers returning for more. Disruptive marketing can be defined as "shattering culturally embedded biases and conventions; setting creativity free to forge a radical new vision of a product, brand, or service". (Morrison, 2022, p.3). Gone are the days of people searching for content, content must be delivered to them. The question is how. It is a surprisingly complicated yet straightforward answer, the Algorithm. The all-mysterious algorithm prioritizes content to individuals based on a variety of information including engagement, for example, "In the YouTube context, this may include viewing, liking, disliking, sharing and commenting on a video post" (Yang et al., 2022, p. 2).

Furthermore, disruptive marketing is a concept that describes how we use marketing tools such as social media to gain viewership through radical creative concepts. The question then becomes, how do you create marketing that stands out in a sea of marketing materials? You do it through Influencers, aka the modern rock star. "Social media influencers are a relatively new phenomenon, but they have had an incredible impact on marketing strategies, consumer protection law, and society generally" (Skalbania, 2022, p. 669). Almost all disruptive marketing is done by these new beasts of entertainment who challenge traditional marketing concepts and create unique and captivating content. "Influencers address their target group directly and have thus become important collaborators for advertisers. In their posts, they include brand and product recommendations in entertaining content that is relevant to the target group" (Rhode & Mau, 2021, p.4).

This content is what builds an influencer's brand, they cater their content to their niche, thus making a community built around common interests and feeding them content to keep them engaged in a topic they love. "Fans are already aware of the product (in this case their favorite team) and are very interested in any updates related to the team" (Ristevska-Jovanovska, 2016, p. 4). Fans have always expected updates on their teams to be disseminated regularly, but how they get that information has changed as sports influencers become the preferred delivery method.

These new tools and products are great, but these efforts do not succeed without a plan and a vision. "A comprehensive marketing plan must guide all marketing efforts if they hope to succeed" (Ristevska-Jovanovska, 2016, p. 3). Influencers trying to disrupt and challenge the status quo must be acutely aware of the state of the market and the void they are attempting to fill. Building a marketing plan for a brand and content that will stand out in an industry are two of the most significant indicators of success for a media-driven organization.

ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

Analyzing the Rise of Deion Sanders and the Power of Well-Off Media" presents a compelling exploration into Coach Deion Sanders' unconventional marketing approach and its remarkable success within the traditional collegiate football world. Coach Sanders' strategy, characterized as disruptive to the status quo, has garnered significant attention and acclaim. This research undertaking undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the transformative influence of Well Off Media, a venture founded by Deion Sanders Jr., within the realm of social influencers. Intriguingly, this study employs a range of management tools to meticulously dissect the strategic actions undertaken by both Deion Sanders Jr. and his father, Deion Sanders. These actions have been instrumental in the cultivation of their brand and social influence, offering invaluable insights into the pathways for success in the ever-evolving landscape of sports media influencers. Notably, this research addresses a discernible gap in academic knowledge concerning Coach Deion Sanders as a social influencer and disruptive marketer, particularly within the context of collegiate coaching in football. The following analysis embarks on a captivating exploration of Coach Deion Sanders' unconventional marketing acumen, which has propelled him to remarkable success within the traditional collegiate football landscape.

Swot Analysis

In the forthcoming evaluation, this research employs a comprehensive approach, including both a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses,Opportunities, and Threats) analysis and Porter's Five Forces Model, to delve deeply into the factors shaping the success of this groundbreaking sports media and influencer marketing initiative (Porter et al., 2002). This integrated methodology aims to provide a nuanced understanding of



the underlying determinants contributing to its remarkable achievements. The SWOT analysis, as a central component of this study, scrutinizes the core facets of the business to discern competitive advantages and vulnerabilities, as noted by Pennington (2022). Internally, it meticulously dissects strengths and weaknesses, uncovering crucial resources, core competencies, and competitive advantages through a functional lens, following the methodology proposed by Sammut-Bonnici and Galea (2015). Furthermore, the external examination of opportunities and threats explores the industry's dynamic landscape, identifying prospects and challenges within the competitive environment, as outlined by Sammut-Bonnici and Galea (2015). This comprehensive SWOT analysis serves as a compass guiding Well Off Media's strategic decisions, pinpointing areas that warrant focused attention (Lee & Walsh, 2011; Pennington, 2022).

Additionally, the researchers utilize Porter's Five Forces Model, a renowned strategic management tool elucidated by Grant (2015), to dissect the broader industry competitiveness. This combined analytical approach not only illuminates the current state of Well Off Media but also sets the stage for our subsequent exploration, which seeks to unearth the intricacies of its journey and accomplishments." Below is a breakdown of this strategic analysis (See Figure. 1).



Figure 1. Swot Analysis for Well Off Media

Strengths

Well Off Media utilizes Deion Sanders' fame and charismatic personality to increase content viewership and brand awareness. Previous studies indicate endorsements by well-known celebrities, specifically athletes, increase brand equity and sales and improve market value (Spry et al., 2011; McCormick, 2018; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018; Derdenger et al., 2018; Elberse&Verleun, 2012; Von Felbert & Breuer, 2020). Additionally, Well Off Media's presence across multiple social media platforms and consistent content creation provide a competitive advantage of exposure. The



company's extensive reach and engagement on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have garnered millions of views, followers, and daily interactions (Carlough, 2022; JSU Athletics, 2023; Schrotenboer, 2023; Witkemper et al., 2012). Marketing and social media have propelled the success and influence of Deion Sanders as a head football coach. Well Off Media's focus on transparent and consistent brand messaging, including familiar faces (Sanders' family members and celebrities) and unique content, allow them to stay ahead of the curve with social media developments and in sports (Karra, 2023).

Weaknesses

Well Off Media's YouTube presence consists primarily of Jackson State University and the University of Colorado football-related content. Additionally, other content focuses on Sanders' family members, such as sons Shedeur and Shilo Sanders and daughters Deiondra and Shelomi Sanders, and Deion Sanders Ir.'s music videos (Well Off Media, 2023). The lack of variety in the content may turn away non-sports fans, limiting the audience reach and engagement. "Successful social media users vary the type of social posts they make" (Geyser, 2021, p. 3; Resnikoff & Nugent, 2021). Successful content creators change content frequently, which excites followers and viewers and keeps the posts fresh (Geyser, 2021). Another limitation is the lack of a central website for Well Off Media. Well Off Media has profile accounts on various social media platforms but does not have a company website. With the lack of a primary site, Well Off Media loses visitors, which may erode the effectiveness of their marketing expenditure by nearly 20% (Schwabe et al., 2020). Boston Consulting Group found a significant negative correlation between webpage visitors and the number of errors and design quality (Schwabe et al., 2020). The absence of a welldesigned and functional website that can serve as a central hub for brand information and engagement may hinder Well Off Media from growing. A final weakness is Well Off Media's seemingly small staff. Deion Sanders Jr. runs Well Off Media, but the availability of additional staff members is not evident (Well Off Media, n.d.; [@deionsandersjr]). Companies with high-performing teams leverage social connections that fuel success (Freidman, 2021). The lack of additional staff can prevent Well Off Media from taking advantage of synergies and cause threatening blind spots (Freidman, 2021).

Opportunities

Well Off Media can benefit from its current social media popularity by establishing more brand collaborations. Successful brand collaborations occur when the talent is very invested in the project and is highly engaged in the process (Boyd, 2022). Well Off Media has the opportunity to join with celebrity, sports, and civil rights brands that align with the values and goals of the Sanders family. Having the same mission will create synergies, expand Well Off Media's reach and attract new audiences (Boyd, 2022). Furthermore, developing collaborations with other institutions will broaden the scope of influence beyond the current university to engage with students and fans from different organizations. A survey conducted by Visual Objects found that 71% of consumers appreciate co-branding partnerships (PR News Wire, 2021). In addition, Well Off Media can create a competitive advantage by using new and innovative social media platforms. By exploring emerging platforms, the company can leverage its unique features and reach untapped audiences (Fountain, 2021).

Threats

Well Off Media could be negatively impacted by the growing calls for government regulation of social media platforms. The possibility of increased rules and restrictions imposed by government bodies can limit Well Off Media's content creation and distribution across social media platforms (Ghosh, 2021). Additionally, the inability to keep up with followers' and viewers' dynamic wants and needs may hinder Well Off Media. Consumers' frequently changing consumption needs create an ever-shifting trend in how audiences engage and consume social media content (Droga and Shah, 2022). This occurrence will require Well Off Media to adapt to maintain continuous relevance. Moreover, direct and indirect competition through social media content creators can lure away followers and viewers from Well Off Media. Building on Well Off Media's current success and second-mover advantages, other influential figures in the sports industry may attract similar audiences and collaborations, eroding Well Off Media's current competitive advantage (Grepperud& Pederson, 2021).

Five Forces Analysis

Moreover, the second method of managerial analysis, known as the Five Forces analysis, originated from the pursuit of a deeper understanding of management styles by Professor Michael Porter, who sought to expand upon the SWOT method he had been teaching. Porter's theory, as articulated in his words, encompasses "The five forces, which include competitive rivalry, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of buyers, the threat of new entrants, and the threat of substitutes, emerged as an encompassing way to examine an industry" (2002, p. 44). This Five Forces Model serves as a lens through which we scrutinize and forecast the competitive dynamics within the social media industry's sports segment. By employing the Five Forces analysis, this research equips Well Off Media with invaluable insights and strategies to exert influence within the industry and fortify the company's position, as emphasized by Grant (2015). Porter's Five Forces Model, a widely recognized strategic management tool, proves indispensable in assessing and comprehending the competitive landscape of an industry (Grant, 2015). A visual representation of this strategic analysis is presented in Figure #2 below to facilitate a deeper understanding.



5.2.1. Competition in the Industry:

Well Off Media operates in a highly competitive sports media space, where capturing and retaining consumer attention is crucial. The competition extends beyond sports influencers and includes established players such as broadcast networks, advertisers, and other sports leagues.



Figure 2. Porter Five Force Analysis

Competition in the Industry

Well Off Media operates in a highly competitive sports media space, where capturing and retaining consumer attention is crucial. The competition extends beyond sports influencers and includes established players such as broadcast networks, advertisers, and other sports leagues.

Potential of New Entrants into the Industry

While the social media influencer space is crowded, it is essential to acknowledge that new entrants do not necessarily need to undermine established influencers to succeed. However, it is essential to recognize the dynamic nature of the industry and the continuous evolution of consumer preferences and content consumption habits. Emphasizing the significance of an established brand with consistent posting as a competitive advantage is valid. Still, it would be valuable to include insights on how Well Off Media can adapt to changing consumer trends and leverage emerging technologies to stay ahead of potential new entrants.

Power of Suppliers

In the case of Well Off Media, suppliers' power primarily lies with the social media platforms on which they post content. However, to enhance credibility, it is essential to provide specific examples and data regarding the dominance and influence of these platforms. Highlighting the potential risks associated with dependence on third-party platforms, such as changes in algorithms, policies, or the emergence of new platforms, can further strengthen the analysis. Additionally, discussing strategies for mitigating these risks, such as building a strong presence across multiple platforms or developing direct audience engagement channels, would add depth to the analysis.

Power of Customers

Recognizing that content consumers hold significant power is a valid observation. Providing specific examples and data on how quickly followers can unsubscribe or disengage from influencers due to controversies or disagreements would be valuable to enhance credibility. This enhancement could include industry statistics on follower churn rates or case studies of influencers who have experienced significant shifts in viewership. Moreover, discussing strategies to engage and retain customers in a highly competitive landscape would be insightful, considering the increasing importance of personalization and audience segmentation in influencer marketing.

Threat of Substitute Products

Acknowledging the presence of substitute products, such as new social networks or entertainment sources, is essential. However, it would be valuable to provide specific examples of emerging platforms or trends threatening the sports media industry to enhance credibility. Additionally, discussing how Well Off Media can differentiate its content, leverage



its unique positioning as an information source for the University of Colorado football program, and continuously innovate to maintain its relevance and prevent the adoption of substitute products would strengthen the analysis.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

According to the analyses, Well Off Media is expected to become more popular among viewers and potential collaborators. A disruptive marketing strategy, increased brand collaborations, and staff growth can positively affect Well Off Media's success in the highly competitive social media industry. The following are key strategic implications to consider:

A. Well Off Media should establish more brand collaborations.

Increasing brand collaborations with celebrities, athletes, civil rights organizations, and other institutions will boost Well Off Media's social media engagement across various platforms. Likewise, these partnershipswill extend Well Off Media's breadth of influence beyond Coach Sanders' current workplace to fans and viewers from different affiliations. Consistent brand messaging and a focus on distinctive yet transparent content creation will position Well Off Media for continued success and a considerable competitive advantage over other social media organizations and influencers.

B. Well Off Media should continue utilizing disruptive marketing to capitalize on current and emerging social media platforms.

Utilizing a disruptive marketing strategy allows Well Off Media to target overlooked market segments. By focusing on ignored segments, the company may improve its foothold in the industry while discouraging the entry of directly competing companies. Staying on the fringe of mainstream social media content will continue to interest current followers and lure new audiences, leading to continued growth and sustainable competitive advantages.

C. Well Off Media must increase its staff.

Well Off Media's under-utilization of staff will hurt the company's ability to exploit synergies. Small teams can result in low productivity, difficulty overcoming adversity, and staying focused (Romero, 2015). Adding support staff can build Well Off Media's talent portfolio and improve the capability to create quality content in a timelier manner.

CONCLUSION

As the spotlight shines on Coach Prime's triumphant tenure at Jackson State University, sports pundits and genuine fans ponder whether this success in the lower college football ranks heralds a future of equal triumphs. This research, a comprehensive analysis of the disruptive force wielded by Well Off Media, founded by Deion Sanders Jr., within the realm of social influencers, provides a beacon of understanding. While certain limitations, such as data availability on engagement metrics and undisclosed organizational decisions, exist, this study illuminates the pathway to success for future sports media influencers. The significance of this study reverberates across academic and practical realms, bridging the gap in our knowledge of Coach Prime as a social influencer and disruptive marketer, particularly within the context of collegiate coaching. Beyond academia, these findings offer a compass for theory development and real-world applications, serving as a vital resource for researchers, marketers, and professionals within the sports industry. As we navigate the future, Coach Sanders' unconventional legacy shines as a guiding light, illuminating the limitless possibilities within the dynamic realm of sports media and influencer marketing.

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