



The Inside Social Media Podcast

Episode 20:

Melissa Rosenthal Brenner, NBA Senior Vice President of Marketing

Rick: All right. One of the most requested brands I hear from people to have here on The Inside Social Media Podcast is the NBA. Well today, I'm psyched to welcome to the show Melissa Rosenthal Brenner who's the NBA's Senior Vice President of Marketing. Melissa thanks so much for being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Melissa Brenner: Thank you so much for having me.

Rick: Absolutely. So let's jump right into it here Melissa. This show is all about hearing what big brands are doing well in social media and then how small businesses can model that behavior within their own minimal social media and marketing budgets. Now, you and your team have built up the NBA to be one of the largest social media communities in the world. Can you take us behind the scenes and tell us how you and your team leverage social media for the NBA and then how might small businesses incorporate some similar strategies into their own business?

Melissa Brenner: Of course. So, the first thing to understand is that social media is not just the tool to promote, you know, NBA assets such as watching the games or buying tickets or going to NBA.com, but we talk of full exclusive content in the form of behind the scenes photos and videos and all with the objective of bringing our fans closer to the game and that's a strategy that our Deputy Commissioner Adam Silver who will be our new commissioner in February of 2014 has expelld many times, is that our goal is to bring the inner arena experience to fans around the world.

We have 30 teams in the United States and Canada. We have one in Toronto, of course. And we have a rabid fan base outside of the U.S. and Canada and our job using social is to engage these fans to get them interested and engaged in our game and our players. And for small business – I think your question was about how we, you know, what the application for small business is.

Rick: Yeah, yeah.

Melissa Brenner: It's about how do you take the experience let's say you're a retailer and bring it offline, so what attributes of your retail experience as an example, do your consumers really like and then how do you make that a digital experience.

Rick: Got you. Got you. Now, how do you guys, you know, with so many social media options out there, one of the biggest challenges I hear from readers and listeners is they're

overwhelmed at all those social media options. You know, they think they need to be on every platform and often end up spreading themselves too thin, thus wasting their, essentially wasting their social media efforts.

So, how does the NBA decide which platforms to be on and then again, how might small businesses be able to take that insight and model it?

Melissa Brenner: Well, look I mean we're a big brand so we have a lot of – a treasure trove of research, but it all comes back to one thing. We want to know where our fans are and we build our social media experiences that around where our fans are, so whether you're on mom and pop shop or you know a startup, talk to your consumers, ask them what they're using.

That should inform your decision about how you invest resources in social media. And then the other thing we do is I can't say this – I can't stress this enough is we listen to our fans in terms of not just where they're going in terms of social media platforms, but also how they're using it. So, how we talk to an NBA fan on Twitter is very different than how we talk to them on Instagram and it's different than how we talk to them on Facebook.

And just to give a broad example, in Facebook it's very much about a discussion and a conversation in a community. So, we ask there open-ended and engaging questions a lot. Twitter has become the ultimate news store, so a lot of it is – a lot of our focus there is in reporting, you know, rapid fire reporting. And Instagram has become a visual empire, so our focus on Instagram is bringing – you know, that old adage that a picture tells a thousand words, but it's using photos to really pictorially tell our NBA story to fans.

Rick: Sure. And I want to point out two points that you brought out there and you said listening and you said asking your consumers. You know listening is something that's a theme that we talk a lot about here on the show and it comes up in many of the different episodes, but the asking people and asking your consumer where they hang out online, what social media platforms they hang out is such an easy thing to do yet I think so many small businesses miss that opportunity and it's such an – sorry, go ahead – it's such easy thing to do.

Melissa Brenner: No, I was going to – I'm agreeing with you and there's so many tools out there in addition to the, you know, the kitchen style research that I mentioned where simply, you know, imagining a mom and pop shop, you know, ask people, talk to your consumers about it. You know that's the primitive easiest way that people have been marketing for hundreds of years, but there's also a lot of visual tools that are pretty easy and cheap to use like Survey Monkey where you could push it out on your existing assets and ask them or your consumers rather, about their behavior and what they enjoy about the platforms, what they expect and what sort of experience they'd want to hear or see from you as the small business provider.

Rick: And I love that you took it a step further and said you know, not only are you asking them where they are and where they enjoy hanging out but how did they like to be engaged with which again I think is something that's such a simple thing to do yet is missed by so many businesses large and small out there that a simple question of you know how do you like to be engaged with and then taking that information and then taking advantage of it.

Melissa Brenner: Yeah. I mean the one thing we say here a lot is it's just as easy to follow a brand as it is to unfollow.

Rick: Yes, yes.

Melissa Brenner: So, just as in on your television you change the channel, someone could very easily be fed up with how you've been messaging them and decide to go somewhere else. So, you're very cognizant of what types of experience you're delivering to your fans.

Rick: Great point, great point. And I want to kind of continue that for a second, you mentioned voice there in social media and that's a challenge that so many people have on social media let alone small, you know, large business, everybody in between. One example is I think they can post one update to all their channels for example and as you were just talking about the NBAs on several different platforms and each has a different voice, what tips would you give to a small business trying to find their voice in social media.

Melissa Brenner: You know I think it's nuanced because it's a combination of listening to how fans are using the platform. You know you could be a keen observer of consumer behavior and then it – so it's partly, you know – I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought for a second. I apologize. No, it's observing how fans are using the platform, but also experimenting.

So, what's great about social media is that very quickly you could put forth content and see how it's working and measure itself against your competitor, that's pretty transparent, against how you're doing on the platform itself. So, it's that sort of experimenting, you know in marketing terms sometimes you call it A-B testing that can allow you to really develop the best experience possible for your consumers.

Rick: Sure, sure. And you bring up a good point there about content and you guys have what I'm guessing is a seemingly endless supply of content and you know there's been a lot of talk here on the podcast about content creation and how social media is really about creating content that adds value to your consumers, the problem for small businesses though is it tends to be time and resource intensive, so in general because of course, it is going to differ from each channel, how does the NBA decide which content to use and can you give maybe a few tips for simplifying content creation for small businesses?

Melissa Brenner: Sure. Well, a couple of things, you're right. We have if nothing else we're a sports league, but we're a content provider. An NBA team plays 82 games a season not including pre-season and for the fortunate team an extensive coast season including the finals, so there's a lot of content. So the job of any digital department is to figure out the right content to put out at the right platform at the right time.

And this is where I get back to the point that your fans help drive that. You'd have to not only be asking the fans about, you know, one example just early on that we had when we queried our fan bases we were giving tune in messaging to report the game – this is a bit of tangent, but relevant example. We were giving tune in messaging for that night's game in the early evening because we thought, you know, two, three hours before in the Eastern time would be a good reminder to watch a really good game that night.

When we asked people, they actually wanted it much earlier in the day because when they were at school or when they're at work they wanted to plan their night's viewing. It was something to look forward to and to get them excited. So, intuitively what we're thought the consumer's behavior was it wasn't what our fans told us. So that was a very important learning for us in how to deliver tune in messaging which is extremely important for the lead as it relates – just kind of going segmenting your questions back to how it relates to small businesses, I think the big mistake that big companies and small companies do is to try to do too much at once.

It sounds a bit trite, but it did happen again and again at different levels. We always say we start small. We test some things. We see how it's doing and then we can scale up pretty quickly, but you have to start. It's one thing to talk about it and say we'll try it, but you've got to – you kind of jump in and experiment, try it and then be ready to jump back if it's not working because again resources are always an issue no matter how big or small you are and then if you see success, be ready to just double down as they say.

Rick: Sure, sure. Now Melissa I want to preface this next question with some crazy stats and I'm using crazy in the best sense possible, okay. So the finals that just wrapped up recently generated 26, almost 27 million tweets from fans on Twitter. Your YouTube channel which has more than a billion and a half video views which is crazy since launching in 2007 had nearly 36 million views during the finals and on Facebook you guys had two of your most successful post of all time.

After game 7, one post has received nearly almost 300,000 likes and 42,000 shares and another post has received more than 209,000 likes and 63,000 shares, crazy numbers. So, with all that said, storytelling is such an important part of marketing any business and social media is a great platform to tell those stories. Can you talk a bit about how you and your team use all the different social channels to tell the league story during the finals?

Melissa Brenner: Yeah. I mean that to me the most fun we have as a department is in the storytelling because before social media, your website and linear television only gave you a certain amount of bandwidth to tell, you know, a few stories. Through social

media, we really could get very granular in terms of interest of our fans. So just to give one example, on Twitter, we just don't have an NBA handle. We have a history handle. We have a staff handle. We have a handle dedicated to NBA in India. I mean the list goes on and on.

So fans can really get a very complex and granular and nuanced experience from us and it gives us a chance to tell stories that we couldn't typically cover and with our players, they're such dynamic athletes on and off the court. I mean you somewhat unfairly give credit to me and my department and in a lot of cases it's really the team and the players who push us to be in social media and to experiment and just simply be better in the space, but – I lost track of my point again. I'm sorry.

Rick: No. That's okay. That's actually – you're kind of heading towards my next question there, so I think that's where we're going with that is that you know it's more than what you and your team are doing. It's a lot of what the teams themselves are doing and the players. So, you know with that said, social media is a two-way conversation and obviously a lot of the players and teams are active on social media, so you guys have some sort of policy in place or – let me say and because that's one question and then the other one is that, you know, what if a player says something that maybe goes against maybe that's not really positive for the league let's just say. Do you guys control or try to control that in any way?

Melissa Brenner: Well, let's start with your second question first about the players. I'd like to think of myself as an optimist and by and large we have our players use social media for incredible things whether it's talking about how hard they practice or how excited they are to be in the finals or for a former colleague to be in the finals, to talk about commitment off the court. You know, our players are – it really tells a great story. I mean the players become as the marketer, brand ambassadors for us.

Rick: Sure.

Melissa Brenner: So, I really focus on those stories. I mean out of over 300 players in the league, we have over two-thirds on Twitter alone, so it's a tremendous amount of marketing hack if you will behind the NBA brand to have these players as active as they are and then in terms of the rules, the rule is pretty straightforward. It's 45 minutes up before the tip off up through the start of media availability is blacked out if you will for any type of social media, no tweeting, texting, anything and that's really an integrity of the game issue.

Clearly we're early adaptors of the league of social media but our product is the game of basketball. When the game is on, you know, everyone is focused on playing and there's that the intensity is such that it doesn't warrant any distraction.

Rick: Sure, sure. Do you guys have some sort of like a meeting with new players who have been drafted and this is their first year into the league? Do you guys sort of sit them down – I'm pretty sure the NFL does something like that where they have sort of media

training if you will and social media policies and so forth. Do you guys do a similar thing where you sit those players down and kind of take them through that sort of thing?

Melissa Brenner: You know it's funny you mentioned that. It's called the Rookie Transition Program and ours is in a couple of weeks. It's in August. And yeah, I mean they – the players are given media training advice of which social media is definitely a component. What you would say at a press conference – what you wouldn't say at a press conference or in the front page of USA Today or in a podcast probably shouldn't be put forward on social media, but this Rookie Transition Program just so you know is pretty broad in its scope.

It talks about nutrition and handling finances and how to stay in shape within a two-game schedule when a lot of these guys have come out of college where the schedule is not nearly as aggressive. It's a pretty robust coursework should we say of this Rookie Transition Program of which social media training is one facet of it.

Rick: Got you. Got you. Melissa, where in your estimation do brands get social media wrong?

Melissa Brenner: I think to echo a point earlier is doing too much with too little resources or not understanding what their fans – I keep saying fans, but that's our business, but hopefully you can–

Rick: Of course.

Melissa Brenner: translate back to consumers–

Rick: Sure.

Melissa Brenner: – not having a firm enough understanding of what your fans want or understanding the platform themselves. I think it's that basic.

Rick: Okay. Okay.

Melissa Brenner: And to a point you made earlier, it's like taking a bit of content and the thinking you could plug and play it on five different platforms when that's just not how it's done and most people – most consumers use multiple social media platforms so they're saying the same thing, the same exact way in a multitude of phases. There's definitely a fatigue factor to it.

Rick: Sure, sure. So, Melissa we have a million dollar question here on the show and when I started this question, the last – in my last episode with Katrina Craigwell from GE, as I started this question she started to laugh and I kind of kept going with it and she said that's exactly what I would have guessed it was. So, I joked with her that I'm going to start asking this question and see if my guest can figure out what that question is. So,

I'm just going to throw this out there to you. I won't put you on the spot for too long, but—

Melissa Brenner: Okay.

Rick: — there is a million-dollar question here on the show and it centers on a specific topic because so many businesses have a challenge with it. Can you guess what it is?

Melissa Brenner: How do you measure—

Rick: Yes.

Melissa Brenner: — or how do you make money?

Rick: Thank you, yes. So, how do you and your team measure the NBA's social media efforts? Good job, by the way.

Melissa Brenner: Thank you. I'll give you my address after the podcast for the big check.

Rick: Okay.

Melissa Brenner: I just want to take a step back. You know, there's a lot that's been written and talked about in social media about the platform. You hear about Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and Pinterest and Tumblr, but there hasn't been nearly as much written about the cottage industry that's grown with these new businesses. They're solely focused on analytic stuff where they help you understand your fans better.

Rick: Yeah.

Melissa Brenner: And like every company I talked to on the B2B side, we're in it, too. I mean how do you understand from a sentiment level if you aggregate all of the public tweets and public Facebook posts and blogposts? How do you start to gain insight with how people feel about a particular topic and that could be a logo on a jersey to flopping to how they feel that Philadelphia Heat being the champions again, so that's in broad strokes very important to us and something where, you know, we're looking at the platforms for the resources they enable, but also we're looking increasingly for third parties that could help us simply be smarter in the space to the extent, you know, we have these software solutions and we're tracking, you know, five different times of the year, by different times of the week and day, all with the notion of to understand what drives fan engagement, what drives their behavior so that we could then better serve them new and relevant content.

Rick: Sure. It all comes back to understanding your — in your case, the fan, so you can give them more of the type of content that resonates and that they engage with.

Melissa Brenner: Right.

Rick: So, you have something called the social media awards and—

Melissa Brenner: Yeah.

Rick: — I'd love to know more about that. How did they get started and what benefit have you seen from having them?

Melissa Brenner: Well, I have to give a lot of credit to Christina Miller who is the general manager of NBA Digital.

Rick: Okay.

Melissa Brenner: NBA Digital is a joint venture between Turner and the NBA because in truth NBA Digital is the driving force behind the social media awards. And it was really meant to promote awareness of our players and teams on social media. You know, as I mentioned before our players and teams have been very active in the space and ultimately successful, so it's a little bit of a way to acknowledge what they've been doing and you know with any sort of award show it drives a bit of competition amongst players and teams to win the award. I mean teams are competitive on the court as our players and they're also competitive off the court as well.

Rick: I love that. I can imagine some conversations that are going on after the season or right after that, just bragging rights about a different award and stuff. It's funny.

Melissa Brenner: Yeah. Behind the teams, you would think we're the Oscars in terms of the ferocity of the competition.

Rick: All right, a couple more questions here for you Melissa.

Melissa Brenner: Sure.

Rick: So, let's say you're a small business owner and you have very little budget for online marketing, but you want to leverage social media to market your business, what are three things that you would do to start out?

Melissa Brenner: Sure. One is identify your target audience. Know who these people are. You know, again, it could be the kitchen research of asking people who come in through the front door or it could be digitized pretty easily, so once you understand who the consumers are, understand what they want all about their lives so you could better serve them content then I would develop a plan that essentially communicates the voice of your business that we discussed about the voice a bit earlier and then the other thing is don't forget about it.

I can't tell you how many small businesses I choose to find in social media and then it looks like it's been abandoned, that they had a good thing going and then it just, you know, they abandon ship for whatever reason. So once you commit and you start to get consumers to engage with you, keep the dialog going. They're interested for a reason.

Rick: Such a good point, be consistent with it.

Melissa Brenner: Yes, be consistent.

Rick: Cool. And last question for you here and then I have – well actually two more questions for you, so what are the trends in social media that you're seeing let's just say over the next year or so and how do you see those trends affecting small business?

Melissa Brenner: Sure. I mean the one thing I think just in broad strokes about trends is that you have to be open to wherever you think the trend is going. There might be something else out there that you didn't anticipate, so make sure you're reading and you know following the platforms carefully because sometimes trends emerge where you least expect it and if anyone thinks they know better, they're lying because we're constantly surprised by things like the wearable technologies such as the Nike FuelBand.

You know, I'm a bit of a fashion snob. I also bad mouth, you know, but it didn't look physically attractive on the outside, but it's so functional and interesting. It's that function and form made it suddenly incredibly cool and therefore a must-have fashionable item. So, the point is the macro point needs to be open and then one thing, you know, I won't go too much into the trends that we see because a lot of that's our secret sauce internally here, but one smaller example is infographics.

We saw people, fans making their own infographics on Facebook and in layman's terms an infographic is taking complicated stuff and putting them into a pretty picture to tell a story but better and more succinctly. We saw fans doing it themselves, so we started doing it because you know, stats are really key driver of our game in terms of interests and participation in fantasy and it's really it's been called social currency.

The more stats you know, the more you talk about our game and the more you want to watch because it's, you know, so the infographic is really about bringing stats to life. So, we had, you know, we just happened to notice this, that on a consumer behavioral level and we start doing it ourselves and from an engagement level some of the most successful posts we had all season were these infographics and if we weren't paying attention to a trend that we saw from our consumers we probably would have missed it.

Rick: Sure. Were there particular platforms? Sorry.

Melissa Brenner: I'm sorry.

Rick: Were there particular platforms that they worked, you know, better than others on?

Melissa Brenner: Good question, so the work mostly on Facebook, but we use it on Twitter – oh excuse me, not Twitter, Instagram a bit too and it's been successful there as well.

Rick: Sure. So more visually-based platforms.

Melissa Brenner: Very visual, correct.

Rick: Yeah, got you, got you. Okay. Last question here for you Melissa, if you were stranded on a desert island and you could listen to one CD and eat only thing for food, what would those things be and why?

Melissa Brenner: It'd be Desert Rose by Sting and sushi.

Rick: Any particular type of sushi?

Melissa Brenner: Ikura, the caviar.

Rick: So you'd be eating caviar sushi to listening to Sting.

Melissa Brenner: And to listening to Sting, I know, just what you expected from the woman who markets the NBA.

Rick: Awesome, awesome. I love it. I love it. So, Melissa thank you so much. Where can people connect with you? Where can they connect with the NBA on social media?

Melissa Brenner: Sure. On Twitter, my handle is @mbrenner B-R-E-N-N-E-R and then on every social media platform, it's just backslash NBA.

Rick: Okay.

Melissa Brenner: So Twitter, as an example [Twitter.com/NBA](https://twitter.com/NBA).

Rick: Got it. Got it. And I'll be sure to link all those links up in the show notes for today's show. Melissa, thank you so much for being on today, I really really appreciate it.

Melissa Brenner: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.

Rick: Absolutely. All right.