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Despite setbacks, Facebook in streaming game to stay

Facebook has been slowly but steadily collecting the streaming rights to a range of sports programming, from college football to the World Surf League. More consumers are watching live content on streaming platforms because of their mobile convenience and interactive elements, including the ability to give real-time feedback and comments.

And while the social media giant has experienced an occasional setback (e.g., losing streaming rights to National Football League games to Twitter in 2016 and to Amazon this year), its global reach, formidable financial resources and out-of-the-digital-box thinking when it comes to partnerships makes Facebook an attractive and competitive platform for over the top sports viewing for a wide variety of fans who prefer to watch sports on their mobile devices.

After being outbid on the NFL streaming rights two years in a row, Facebook went in a different, less high-profile direction earlier this year. It entered into an exclusive deal with digital sports broadcaster Stadium to stream 15 college football games this fall that won't be available anywhere else online or on television, according to the Chicago Business Journal.

Critics have pointed out, however, that the nine Conference USA games and six Mountain West games may not be on the average college football fan's list of must-see matchups outside of the schools' alumni.

Major League Baseball already has a deal to stream 20 games nationally on Facebook that are simulcast on MLB.TV and MLB.com. Now Facebook is also leveraging at least one team's desire to explore alternative local distribution strategies.

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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In a pilot effort, the Chicago Cubs simulcast four regular-season games on Facebook Live this year, the Chicago Business Journal reported. ABC provided the broadcasts — two midweek day games and two weeknight games — that were streamed only in the Cubs' designated market.

Facebook ensured that only viewers in the Cubs' designated Chicago market could see the games through "geotargeting." In addition, only three out of the four games were actively promoted to Facebook users.

The results were impressive: The four test games averaged 222,000 unique viewers (defined as viewers who watched for three or more seconds). For comparison's sake, Friday night Cubs games streamed to a national audience averaged 1.4 million unique viewers, notes the Chicago Business Journal.

With the Cubs' broadcast deal with NBC ending in 2020, social media platforms like Facebook may represent the Cubs' best option to control their local TV rights. It may also prompt other teams to make similar deals. While Facebook has plenty of

time to fine-tune its streaming plans, three years is also a long time in the world of sports social media.

On the international front, Facebook began collaborating with Major League Soccer and Univision Deportes to livestream regular season games this year. More than 20 matches that were broadcast on Univision networks in Spanish were livestreamed in English, offering Facebook-exclusive commentary, fan Q&As and polling features, according to Facebook.

In addition, the MLS produced 40 "Matchday Live" shows exclusive to Facebook that aired on MLS game days, featuring analysis and a preview of the day's upcoming matches.

Broadening its global soccer reach, Facebook received the right to stream matches (including four quarterfinal matches) from the Champions League, Europe's top soccer tournament, through a partnership with Fox Sports.

Appealing to international fans on both sides of the Atlantic could be a smart move since soccer is one of the most popular sports on Facebook, according to

Bloomberg. Last year, 34 million people posted 98 million interactions on the social media platform related to the Champions League final alone, Bloomberg added.

Then there are the niche sports events with loyal, international followings. Sports Illustrated broke the news in March that the World Surf League would partner with Facebook to livestream its 2017 Championship Tour men's and women's events and Big Wave Tour events. The surfing league, whose Facebook page has more than 6 million followers, ceased traditional, live broadcasts due to the unpredictable nature of waves and weather. Facebook agreed to livestream more than 800 hours of live content for the specialized sport.

CrossFit teamed up with Facebook to stream live events, including the fitness company's regional competitions in May and June. Sports Business Daily reported that the new partnership also includes at least 40 live shows throughout the year, such as "Coaches Corner" and "Freemmy Friday," and behind-the-scenes footage of CrossFit events. CrossFit will also be streaming content on YouTube and its own website.

To showcase its new and continuing sports content, as well as other content, Facebook announced in August that it revamped its site to accommodate more live events by launching a section called Watch, specifically for long-form videos.

With feedback from broadcasters and rights holders, Facebook designed the Watch platform to make it easier for users to find and watch shows comprised of multiple live or recorded episodes. According to Facebook, Watch is organized around what the user and his or

her communities are watching and connects viewers following the same shows.

In terms of social media, Facebook is one of the most established platforms and, at times, may be forced to play catch-up with more flexible newcomers and companies that are more entrenched locally.

Facebook recently saw its \$610 million bid fall short for the local

rights to stream cricket matches in the Indian Premier League, a prize it has been eyeing for some time as a way into the digital distribution market in India. Instead, the cricket league deal went to 21st Century Fox's Star India unit, which offered \$2.55 billion for digital and television rights around the world, according to CNET.

Facebook appears to be playing

the long game with its ambitious moves and sheer tenacity. The social media platform also has a considerable asset in consumers' trust.

BI Intelligence recently issued a new report that analyzes consumer perception of major social platforms and ranks Facebook second behind LinkedIn — a non-player in sports streaming — and ahead of Instagram,

Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube.

User's trust in Facebook makes them more likely to share content from the platform, notes BI Intelligence. Consumers' trust, along with Facebook's huge number of highly engaged users around the world, make the social media platform one to watch in the coming years in the category of live streaming sporting events.