

NHL pushes digital syndication into overdrive

By ERIC FISHER & TRIPP MICKLE

Staff writers

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The NHL is aggressively expanding its digital content syndication efforts, signing more than 20 new deals in the last three months that will make league material available on a variety of sports Web sites, blogs, online video portals and direct-to-consumer platforms.

The battery of new league partners includes news sites and portals such as The Hockey News, ESPN.com and Yahoo!; blogs such as SB Nation, Bleacher Report and Yardbarker; video hubs like YouTube and Hulu; and digital retail outposts including iTunes and the PlayStation Network. Several more such agreements are expected in the coming months.

The deals mark a concerted effort by the NHL to distribute its digital content across as many platforms as possible with the goals of increasing both raw advertising impressions and the rates for that inventory, boosting merchandise sales, heightening traffic back to NHL.com, and increasing subscriptions to the league's GameCenter Live out-of-market video package.

"It's pretty simple. Every presence of digital engagement is where NHL content should be," said Perry Cooper, NHL senior vice president of digital and direct marketing. "We've been building up our digital strategy over the past two years, developing our content, and this is the time to take our content and have it also live in these other areas."

The league's strategy stands in contrast to many other major sports properties that have resisted digital syndication efforts and, in some cases, have instead imported third-party material to buttress their own home pages. But NHL officials do not believe they are risking the cannibalization of their online audience and reducing traffic to NHL.com. Rather, traffic to the league site is up 135 percent in the last six months, a figure league executives credit in part to the early fruits of the syndication strategy.

"While we'd like to think that everyone wants to go to the mother ship, we think we're creating proprietary content that isn't available in other places and we want to make that available to big players in the space," said John Collins, NHL chief operating officer.

The increased advertising inventory has also now allowed the NHL to bid on larger advertising requests for proposal for which it previously did not have enough scale.

Taking a lead role in striking the series of deals is Alex Simon, NHL senior director of digital business development. The pacts he helped strike include a mix of revenue-sharing agreements, upfront rights-oriented deals and commissions for leads generating new merchandise sales and video subscriptions on NHL.com. On many of the third-party sites, the NHL has placed a version of its new NHL.com video player built in partnership with **NeuLion Inc.**

The new NHL-YouTube agreement in particular expands upon a 2006 deal that marked the first such pact between the Google-owned company and a major sports league. In the new deal, the league gains the ability to identify user-created NHL content, tag it, and then receive a percentage of advertising revenue associated with the user-uploaded material. Since more than 85 percent of NHL-related video on YouTube is uploaded by fans, the new economic potential is significant, and Simon said the league expects to "conservatively double revenues" this year from YouTube.