

Digital Media Client Brief: Pittsburgh Penguins (NHL)

1. Analysis of Client's Current Digital Media Practices

The Pittsburgh Penguins are a legacy NHL franchise with a strong brand identity, a loyal regional fanbase, and global recognition thanks to their championship history. Their digital presence reflects this stability, but it also reveals an opportunity. The team continues to operate like a traditional powerhouse in a creator-driven environment that now rewards personality and constant interaction.

Across X (Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, the Penguins stay active and professional. Their voice is consistent, their graphics are clean, and their in-game updates are reliable. The Penguins still rely on a broadcast-style approach, such as lineup cards, final scores, and basic interviews, rather than the interactive, personality-driven content that modern NHL fans engage with most.

Fan Interaction:

On X, the Penguins push out real-time updates and announcements, but fan engagement is limited mainly to likes and occasional replies. You rarely see polls, conversations, debates, or fan-submitted content. The account is solid, but it feels more like a newsroom than a community.

Contests and Promotions:

The Penguins run occasional contests or theme nights, but they aren't part of a sustained digital campaign strategy. Where other teams run ongoing hashtag challenges, monthly fan spotlights, or sponsor-activated digital rewards, Pittsburgh's efforts are more sporadic. Opportunities for fan rewards, discounts, or loyalty challenges could be far more intentional.

Platform-Specific Observations:

- **Instagram:** High-quality photos and clean carousels. Reels are underused despite being the strongest discovery format on the platform.
- **TikTok:** The most significant missed opportunity. The Penguins post occasionally, but the content lacks humor, storytelling, and TikTok-native creativity. Teams like the New Jersey Devils and the Vegas Golden Knights use this to appeal to more Gen Z fans.
- **YouTube:** Good mic'd-up clips and interviews, but inconsistent posting and no episode-based content strategy on the platform, with no weekly series or recurring segments.
- **Facebook:** Mostly traditional content for older fans, but largely repurposed posts that don't leverage Facebook's strengths for long-form storytelling and community-driven engagement.

Overall, the Penguins' digital presence is solid, but it feels like they're playing it safe. The organization has all the assets needed to dominate digitally, but it hasn't fully embraced a modern, creator-style content strategy that resonates with today's demographic of sports fans.

2. Recommendations to Enhance Digital & Social Media Presence

A. Make Short-Form Video the Heart of the Strategy

Short-form video isn't optional anymore because it has become the heartbeat of sports engagement. Deloitte's Sports Fan Insights report shows that younger fans prefer highlights, behind-the-scenes clips, and personality-driven microcontent over more traditional broadcasts. Short-form is also the NHL's fastest-growing content format. Teams like New Jersey and Vegas are pulling younger fans into the league almost entirely because of TikTok and Reels.

The Penguins should commit to a consistent pipeline of:

- Behind-the-scenes Reels and TikTok videos
- 20 to 30 second mic'd-up clips and interviews
- Locker room celebrations after wins
- Player warm-ups and tunnel moments

This shifts the brand from "team coverage" to "team personality," which is where the NHL has massive growth potential.

B. Build a Penguins+ Digital Membership Layer

Following PwC's insights on direct-to-consumer engagement, the Penguins should create a free digital membership tier. Something simple but effective, built around access and exclusivity. A Penguins+ tier would also give the team first-party fan data, something the NHL currently lacks league-wide, thereby increasing the value of sponsorships and personalizing future marketing.

Features could include:

- Early access to merch drops
- Digital badges and collectibles
- Fan challenges with rewards
- Personalized stats dashboards

This creates a direct relationship with fans, boosts first-party data collection, and adds long-term value for sponsors.

C. Shift Toward Player-Driven Storytelling

Modern sports fandom is player-first. Gen Z mainly follows personalities more than teams. The Penguins should highlight emerging young talent and prospects to build future brand loyalty.

Spotlight and feature these five players in casual, personality-driven content:

- **Ben Kindel** (18-year-old Forward, 1st-round pick in 2025, Penguins #3 prospect)

- **Sergei Murashov** (21-year-old Goalie, holds several AHL (Wilkes-Barre) and ECHL (Wheeling) franchise records, posted a shutout in his 2nd career NHL start last week)
- **Ville Koivunen** (22-year-old Forward, 2021 2nd-round pick, Pens #2 prospect)
- **Rutger McGroarty** (22-year-old Forward, 1st-round pick in 2022, Pens #1 prospect)
- **Harrison Brunicke** (19-year-old Defenseman, 2024 2nd-round pick, Pens #5 prospect)

Fans want to see players laughing at practice, answering fun questions, trying TikTok challenges, and giving fans a glimpse into their world. This builds long-term emotional investment that will outlive the successful era of the big three (Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang), as well as legendary Penguins goaltender and fan favorite Marc-Andre Fleury, who retired in 2025.

D. Integrate Social & Traditional Media into a Unified Fan Experience

Drawing on insights from the Georgetown Law article on fragmentation, the Pittsburgh Penguins should design a seamless loop between digital and traditional media. The NFL's San Francisco 49ers do this effectively by linking broadcasts to digital-only video series. The Penguins could adopt a similar model.

Ideas could include:

- Use QR codes during TV broadcasts to unlock exclusive behind-the-scenes content
- Feature digital-first content during the intermission breaks in TV broadcasts
- Run TikTok or Instagram-exclusive contests that are announced during the games
- Add AR stat overlays for fans watching in PPG Paints Arena or on the Penguins app

This connects the in-arena, at-home, and mobile experiences into one cohesive system.

E. Activate Interactive, Fan-Driven Engagement Tools

The Penguins should incorporate more:

- Polls (example: Who scores the opening goal tonight?)
- Trivia (example: Name that 2016 Stanley Cup moment!)
- Comment challenges (example: Describe last night's OT winner in one emoji!)
- TikTok stitch challenges after highlight-reel-worthy goals or saves

People engage more when they feel involved. The Pittsburgh Penguins need to open the door wider so their fans can get in on the action, not just consume content. The Vegas Golden Knights used this strategy with their 'describe last night in one word' posts that routinely generate thousands of replies.

3. Examples of Ideal Social Media & Links to Reinforce Recommendations

Links to Official Pittsburgh Penguins Channels:

- X: <https://twitter.com/penguins>

- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/penguins>
- TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@penguins>
- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/penguins>

Best-Practice Models from Other NHL Teams:

A. Vegas Golden Knights (TikTok)

TikTok Link: <https://www.tiktok.com/@vegasgoldenknights?lang=en>

Why this is a best practice:

- They lean into humor, trending audio, and meme culture.
- They show players in casual, fun environments, not just practices or games.
- They're one of the few NHL teams that consistently see their videos go viral.

This is an area where Pittsburgh's content currently falls flat, especially compared to similar market-size teams.

How the Penguins can apply it:

- Create trend-based videos featuring McGroarty, Brunicke, or Koivunen.
- Showcase funny behind-the-scenes moments (travel days, locker-room jokes).
- Use TikTok filters, trending audio, and audience challenges regularly.

B. New Jersey Devils (TikTok)

TikTok Link: <https://www.tiktok.com/@njdevils?lang=en>

Why this is a best practice:

- They heavily lean into personality-driven content and are not afraid to be playful & fun.
- They amplify players' humor, quirks, and off-ice interests that resonate with Gen Z fans.
- The comments section is extremely active, creating a community rather than an audience.

How the Penguins can apply it:

- Give young Penguins prospects more screen time.
- Let players take over the TikTok or another platform's stories for a day.
- Show more unscripted moments to humanize the players in the eyes of the fans.

C. Seattle Kraken (Instagram)

Instagram Link: <https://www.instagram.com/seattlekraken/?hl=en>

Why this is a best practice:

- Their videos and graphics are sleek, modern, and highly stylized.
- They prioritize cinematics, player storytelling, and unique editing styles.
- They have one of the most cohesive visual identities in the NHL.
- They used Behind the Scenes features to build an emotional connection with fans early in the franchise's history.

How the Penguins can apply it:

- Introduce a recurring YouTube series ("Penguins Unfiltered" or "Inside the Igloo")
- Use cinematic edits during practices, warmups, and player intros.
- Invest in a stronger design identity across platforms (fonts, motion graphics, animations).

D. Florida Panthers (Instagram)

Instagram Link: <https://www.instagram.com/flapanthers/?hl=en>

Why this is a best practice:

- They post extremely quickly after key moments (goals, fights, saves, fan reactions).
- They connect digitally with their new culture that emerged during their Stanley Cup runs.
- They embrace the chaos of hockey fandom by including plenty of jokes, crowd videos, and emotional moments.

How the Penguins can apply it:

- Speed matters: post big moments immediately to avoid missing the brief hype window.
- Lean into fan energy, including crowd reactions, arena clips, and fan celebrations.
- Build a digital identity tied to Pittsburgh's culture and the city's identity.

4. References

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