


Dutch Runners: Serving the Running Market Through Technology

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by Marije de Gruijter

ABSTRACT

Within the running market in the Netherlands there are two distinct groups: those who run individually and those who run in groups. Running as part of a group is facilitated by various clubs and running groups. To improve its position in the market and establish itself as the natural authority for running in the mind of the public, the Royal Dutch Athletics Federation has developed the Dutch Runners programme for individuals not interested in affiliating with a club or running group. The programme includes a direct membership scheme and technological developments such as an online platform, an audio coaching tool and a smart phone application, which together create chances to respond to the needs of individual runners and thereby support greater participation in the sport. This case study describes the elements of the programme and results through 2013. The author's conclusions are 1) the initiative has helped to increase membership and contributed to the national trend of more people exercising regularly and 2) the elements of the programme can be transferred to other European countries for the benefit of runners and national athletics federations.

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Introduction

Research shows that endurance running in the Netherlands has boomed in recent years as increasing numbers of people, particularly women, have taken up the sport. In fact, this growth is not unique to the Netherlands and can be regarded as an international trend. Among the reasons suggested to explain this development are the willingness of more and more people to be proactive in maintaining or improving their personal health and fitness and the increasing social importance of a slim appearance. Running is an accessible and relatively low-cost means to these and other aims.¹

This growth has also been stimulated by increasing commercialisation around all aspects of the sport, including the organisation of mass participation running events. Without a doubt, these events are getting people to move and adopt a healthier lifestyle. Approximately 50% of those participating in these events in the Netherlands have taken up the sport only in the last five years and these people are mainly between the ages of 30 and 35, a group whose rate of participation in sport is known to be below the national average.²

Governance of running and the rest of athletics in the Netherlands is the responsibility of the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie* (Royal Dutch Athletics Federation), hereinafter to be referred to as the federation. In addition to its traditional roles related to high-performance athletics - organising, for example, Dutch championships, guiding top athletes towards participation in international championships and the Olympic Games, and coordinating the national competition calendar – the federation looks after the interests of its 140,000 members. It is among the top eight sports associations in the Netherlands and is one of the few that still enjoys an increasing membership. Most of the federation's growth comes from participants who are mainly interested in running for health, fitness and social reasons. As both a cause and a result of this situation, the federation has positioned itself as a natural authority in the sphere of running and is making significant efforts to serve the country's runners.

This case study documents these efforts, including the development of an online platform, an audio coaching tool and a smart phone application to serve runners. It is hoped that it can provide ideas and guidance for other federations that are seeking to serve the running market and strengthen their positions.

The Opportunity

As a reflection of an ever more individualistic society and lifestyles where the time to coordinate personal activities with others is under increasing demands, the new runners in the Netherlands have tended not to join traditional athletics clubs or other formal running groups. VAN BOTTENBURG & HOVER (2009) have shown that half of mass participation race runners prepare for their events on their own.³

Runners who train individually are not always best informed about training methodology and may not maximise the benefits and enjoyment possible from the sport. Moreover, these runners often suffer from injuries due

to strains arising from training in a way that is overenthusiastic or too one-sided in the means used. They are therefore at a greater risk of stopping their sport than those who receive good coaching and supervision in a group. However, outside the club system and formal running groups, the opportunities for an individual to obtain this type of support are limited.

As a part of its service to the sport, the federation has seen the chance to use its expertise to assist recreational and health-oriented runners. Its aim is to be an inspirational coach for runners, providing them with guidance and support so that they can safely enjoy their sport in a setting that is appropriate for their lifestyle and preferred ways of communicating.

Objectives

Based on its vision and mission, the federation has set out the following objectives:

- Give form to the federation's role as a natural authority in running;
- Identify the various target groups within the running community and deliver a suitable package of products and services for each target group;
- Develop digital tools such as interactive functionalities on the website, virtual coaching, a smart phone application and social media;
- Develop other new products and services for recruitment and retention.

Different Types of Membership

In April 1998, the federation introduced a direct membership mainly as a way to engage recreational runners. Since then individuals no longer have to go through a club or running group to be affiliated with the federation. They can avoid the perceived negative aspects of traditional membership routes yet be eligible for benefits offered by the federation.

Ten years later, as the number of runners in the country grew, the federation developed its offer by creating an online platform, Dutch



Figure 1: Homepage of www.dutchrunners.nl

Runners, to support those who choose direct membership (Figure 1). Dutch Runners is a virtual sports club providing a flexible service for a membership fee that can be paid for either a year or six months at a time.

As a Dutch Runner you will have access to the entire running calendar of the Netherlands. You will be given training programmes and personal advice, and be able to ask questions to experts in the fields of nutrition, running technique and injuries. There are also personal pages on which you can easily maintain a record of your training details. All these features can be accessed at any time from any place with an Internet connection.

The registration of the personal running data can also be carried out through a Dutch Runners free account. This account gives ac-

cess to the personal running page of the community, but this does not provide the runner with access to the training programmes and online experts. For further information, please visit www.dutchrunners.nl.

There has been a growth in the number of individual runners taking up the federation's offers over the last few years. At the end of 2013 the number of runners with a Dutch Runners free account was 51,402. Figure 2 shows the growth of members of the paid Dutch Runners memberships 2009-12, based on the first quarter of the year in question. In terms of percentages, the number of individual members of Dutch Runners grew by 24.81% in 2012 compared with 2011. Note that the number of women is growing particularly fast.

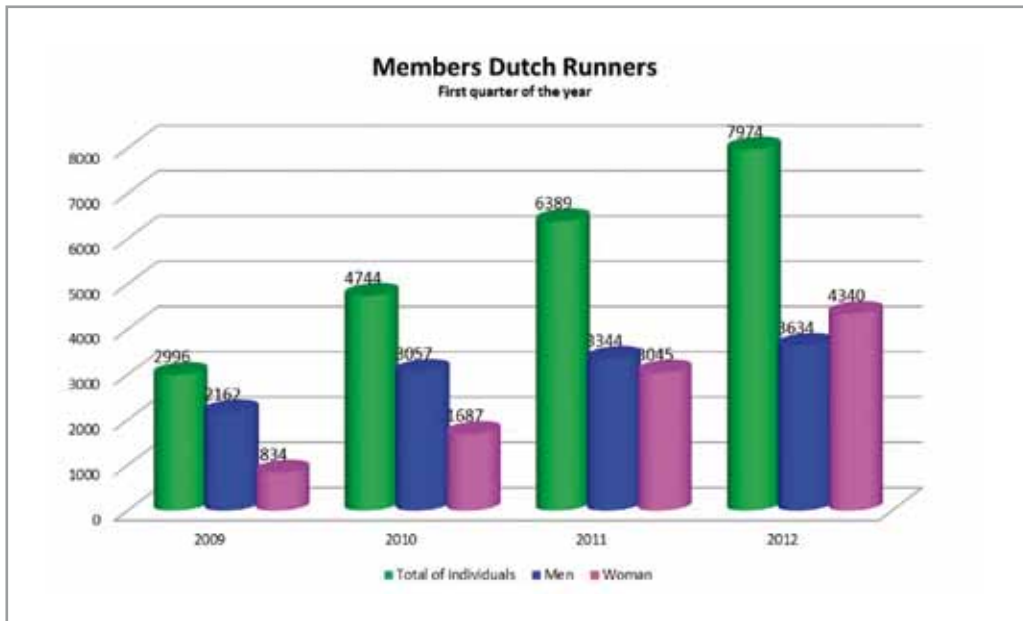


Figure 2: Dutch Runners membership growth 2009 to 2012

Running Coach

In September 2009, the federation introduced a programme, called Running Coach, which helps runners to train by using audio support. The spoken training programmes, which can be played on an MP3 player, have been designed for runners of all levels by Olympic marathon silver medallist Gerard Nijboer and Rob Veer, a well-known trainer of runners and triathletes. The programmes are particularly suitable for runners preparing for the many events held in the Netherlands. The 5km (two levels), 10km, 15km and half marathon (21.1km) are all covered. Whilst training, the runner is provided with tips, useful information and motivation. What's more, music is played to make the training more enjoyable.

The Dutch Runners Mobile Application

In the Netherlands there are now 7.6 million smartphones in use, and various studies⁴ have shown that this number will increase even further. The use of smartphones has become

much broader than simply phoning and sending text messages. With all the applications that are available, the smartphone is now an almost essential part of everyday living. Importantly, sports activities are becoming increasingly supported by mobile applications and other technology. Nike+ and Runkeeper are probably the most well known running apps. They not only provide runners with information, but also make it possible for them to collect their training data and, perhaps even more importantly, to share it with others.

The federation responded to these trends by developing the Dutch Runners mobile application (Figure 3) to be fully compatible with the online Dutch Runners platform and Running Coach. Launched in March 2012, it is available via Apple's iTunes App Store and is compatible for phones that use iOS 4.2 or newer. The Android application is available in the Google Play Market; version 2.1 or higher is required. The versions for both operating systems are available free of charge.



Figure 3: Dutch Runners mobile application start page

After registering, the runner can start training and recording his/her training statistics using the application. Using the GPS function of the smartphone the route and speed of the training session can easily be measured. This data can be synchronised simply with the on-line Dutch Runners platform and after running the runner can take a look at his/her training statistics and exact route on the platform (Figure 4 and Figure 5). Logging in is done using the same details that were used when registering the application.

Use of Running Coach through the application requires a Dutch Runners (annual or six monthly) membership. The runner receives login details, which allow use of both the Dutch Runners application and the online platform.

Table 1 provides a summary of the various features, including the applicability of each operating system and the type of membership.

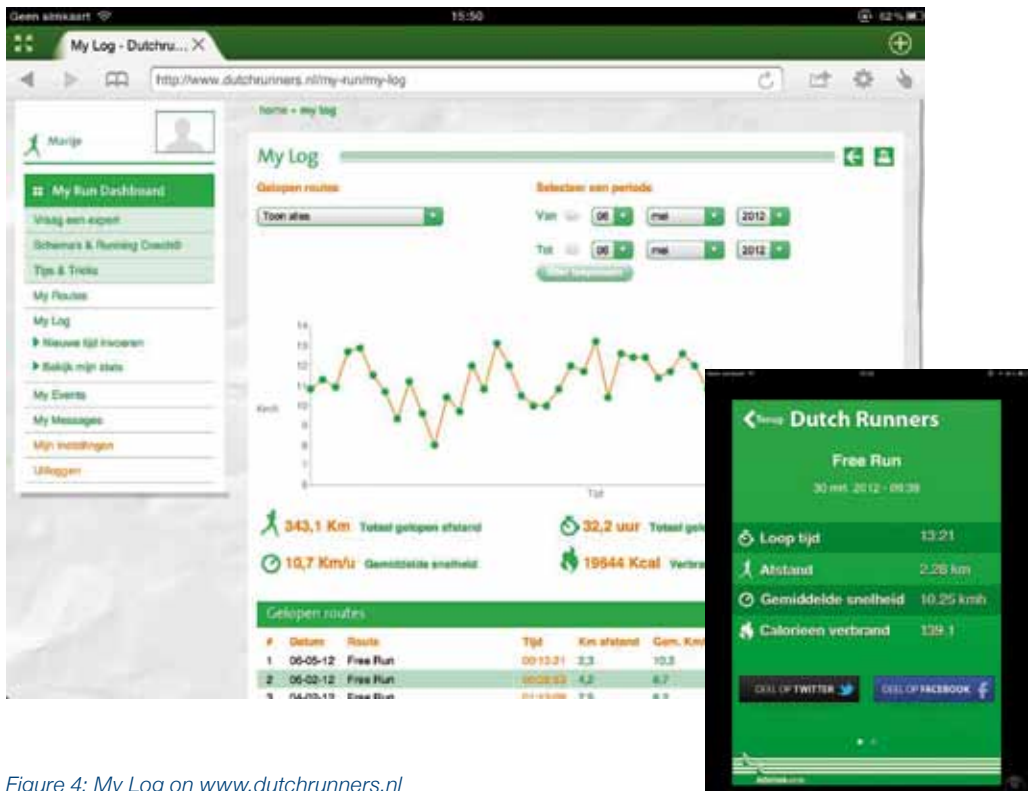


Figure 4: My Log on www.dutchrunners.nl

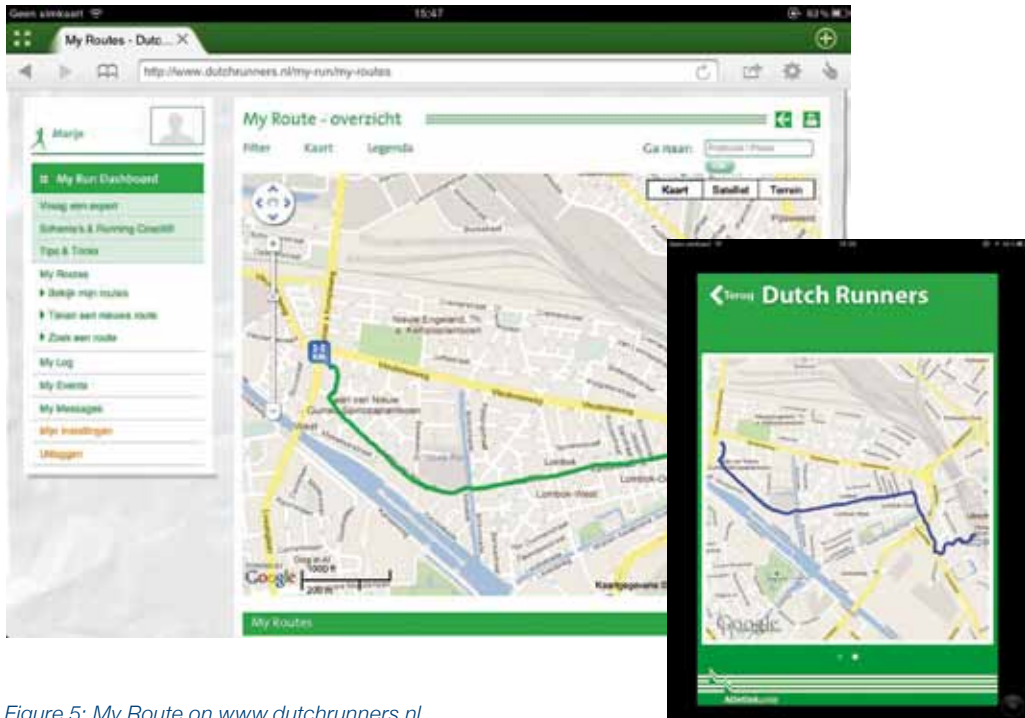


Figure 5: My Route on www.dutchrunners.nl






























Features	Description	Device	Type of Member
My Settings	In My Settings you can personalize you details, such as your name and weight. And you can activate your Twitter and Facebook account.	 	  
Free Run	Using the Free Run option you can run your one work-out. It's possible to edit a personal playlist, so you can run with your own favorite music.	 	  
Running Coach	The Running Coach option are work outs with the audio coaching of Renate Wennemars. It's possible to follow the program for your favorite distance and get the audio coaching during the work out. Besides the audio coaching you can edit a personal playlist, so you can run with your own favorite music.	 	 
Live tracking GPS	Live tracking with GPS, this features will track your speed and directions en put them together on a map.	 	  
Running Statistics "My Log"	The running statistics is in fact your personal log. So with help of the live tracking it will record your total running time, distance, average speed and burned calories. The statistics are put together in the My log section of the app. For every single work out it's possible to upload it to your personal page on Dutchrunners.nl. Besides logging the single work outs, the running statistics are give you an overview of your total running time, distance and average speed.	  <small>* Not for iPod touch</small>	  
Share with friends	Share with friend is the feature how makes it possible to share work out with your friend through Facebook and Twitter.	  <small>* Not for iPod touch</small>	  

Table 1: Features of the Dutch Runners application

Developments in 2013

Since the introduction of the Dutch Runners application, the federation has aimed to continue the (technological) developments and use the facts and figures that are connected with the application and the online community for the development of the sport. This section describes the steps taken in 2013

Further development of Running Coach

In order to retain individual Dutch Runners members it is important to keep the various Running Coach (audio coaching) programmes diverse and motivating. The popularity of this tool has created a demand for the programmes to be updated or improved in what will be an ongoing process. At the end of 2012 the federation added a new programme for the half marathon and work is currently underway on additional programmes. It is also integrated Running Coach with the 'Start to Run' face-to-face intensive coaching courses for beginners that it offers throughout the country twice per year.

Overview of local running training sessions at clubs

The federation has developed a technical back-end to provide a dynamic online overview of the local training sessions within the online community. This gives users an overview of everything being offered in the area of running in the Netherlands helps to connect individuals runners with those who run in groups. There will be two further developments. The first step will be to collect data from the local running clubs. This will be done via a dynamic environment where clubs can maintain their own data. The second step will be to create a user-friendly webpage within the online community for runners.

Collaboration with other actors in the running market

In the second part of 2012, a Masters degree student researched the requirements of what the running events in the Netherlands need from the federation. It was found, for example, that assistance could be provided with

obtaining event supplies. The federation then started working with the market leader in event supplies and created an online shop where organisers can rent or buy supplies. One of the most wanted items is an AED (Automated External Defibrillator), an important tool for safety during running events.

After the launch of the *Hardloopkalender* (running calendar) application, which includes all the running events in the Netherlands the Federation started another collaboration. The first thought was to integrate a calendar into the Dutch Runners application but it was decided to maintain the simplicity and training-related focus of that application and develop a separate calendar application. In May 2013 the federation started working together with Runner's World, a leading running magazine in the Netherlands, to create a single, authoritative calendar of all running events in the country. This is now available through the *Hardloopkalender* mobile application, online on the Dutch Runners community and printed in the magazine. Without any promotion the first version of the application was downloaded almost 10,000 times by the end of the year. Currently, the federation is working to improve the application by adding more event details, make it more user-friendly and easier to share through social media. We expect to launch the improved application, with over 1800 running events, in March 2014.

Integration with social media

The Dutch Runners platform, the Dutch Runners application and the *Hardloopkalender* application are all now completely integrated with Facebook and Twitter. This provides runners more possibilities for sharing their sport with others through the social networks. They are able to describe what they find interesting and what they think of running events and they can involve their friends and invite them participate. This will increase the interaction and impact.

Conclusion

At this stage it is possible to make a general conclusion that the implementation of technological developments such as the online community and the Dutch Runners application, has made it possible for the federation to increase its market and its status as an authority on matters related to recreational running. By supporting both runners affiliated with clubs and the increasing number of individual runners in the Netherlands, it has been able to increase membership and contribute to driving the trend of more people exercising.

We believe all the elements of the federation's programme discussed here can be transferred to other European countries. Just as the well-known running applications of Nike+ and Runkeeper can be used internationally, the technology such as Running Coach, the online Dutch Runners platform and the Dutch Runners application can be easily passed on to other federations. The starting point for those interested is to get a clear idea about the needs and wishes of the runners in their own countries and develop a strategy for using (and modifying) the technology and functionalities accordingly.

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3 Ibid.

4 Source: <http://www.opta.nl/nl/actueel/alle-publicaties/publicatie/?id=3584>