THE MAGIC REALLY HAPPENS WHEN YOU BRIDGE THE VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL WORLD

Dragan Perendija

»We did it, 19 years, baby … I want to thank you very much and that's why I'm telling you first: I'm about to retire. Love you. Talk to you soon …«. Those are the words of the NBA star Shaquille O'Neal in his retirement video that was one of the game changers in sports industry – namely, O'Neal was the first celebrity athlete to announce their retirement over social media, directly to fans and public. Amy Jo Martin was – as his social media adviser – by his side then and also shot the famous video with a cell phone. Shaq was Amy Jo's first client and has since become one of the most influential celebrities using social media. It's interesting to know that the first account verified by Twitter belonged to him. And the second to Amy Jo, digital pioneer and innovator, CEO of Digital Royalty, called also »the Twitter Queen«.

Sport has always been an interesting platform and provoking changes in society; currently it also plays an important role in the promotion and development of social media. How do you – from the other side – see the influence of social media on sports and its business?

Finally, some teams and leagues are recognizing the importance of social communication and they are beginning to train their athletes on social media. With the help of Digital Royalty University classes, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), for example, has trained all of their fighters (over 300) on how to properly use social media to connect with their fans. The organization offered an incentive-based program encouraging fighters to increase fan engagement and rewards those who have made the most impact with a quarterly bonus. Social media has definitely had an impact on how broadcast and media rights are now negotiated. Before social media existed, broadcast rights and media rights were sometimes contracted out for 10 years at a time. Once social media started gaining popularity, there were disputes between teams and broadcasters about how and what could be shared, like videos shared in real-time. Now, social media rights can be carved out separately when negotiating contracts.

Social communication tools also increase the interactivity between fans and athletes, and help expose the humans behind the brand. Athletes who understand how to harness the power of social media have received additional endorsement deals because they have influence over a loyal and engaged fan base.

> ❯ Social media has definitely had an impact on how broadcast and media rights are now negotiated. Once social media started gaining popularity, there were disputes between teams and broadcasters about how and what could be shared, like videos shared in real-time.

You entered the sports world as the Director of Digital Media & Research at Phoenix Suns five years ago, which was also a first-of-its--kind position within NBA. Today the digital department is a must for any sports organization that wants to work on its own brand and engage with fans on a daily basis. In those times social media was still the wild wild West, to use your own words. What were the goals and benefits of social media activities and communication you were looking for at Phoenix Suns at the beginning?

The goal in the beginning was to get fans closer to the athletes and the sponsors closer to the affinity of

the fans and athletes. I tried to use social communication tools to find touch points of integration into the conversation vs. interrupting the conversation. Unlike traditional media or sponsorships, social media should be treated as a dialogue rather than a monologue.

Were sponsors also already involved in the club's social media communication at the time?

When I started experimenting in the social space, the sports industry and corporate world had not yet embraced social media as a viable means of communication. Around this time, YouTube was being used and LinkedIn was starting to be used, but mainly by corporate executives. Facebook, Twitter and all the other social networks we use on a daily basis were not being used at all.

Later, with your own company Digital Royalty you have consulted many elite sports properties such us Chicago White Sox, LA Kings, NASCAR, etc. Which are the similarities and differences between such properties regarding social media goals?

One of the main differences between sports leagues is their economic model. The ownership structure/governing body makes a huge difference in how the organization approaches social media. The NBA has a governing body comprised of 30 owners versus the UFC, which is led by its President, Dana White.

In connection with the monetization of social media activities, Digital Royalty developed a measurement formula in which you use cold metrics (number of TW followers or FB likes) and soft metrics (sentiment, engagement) that are connected to influence (ROI in your metrics stands for Return on Influence). Can you explain shortly where you personally see the essence of social media metrics?

The essence of social media metrics are engagement and sentiment balanced with reach. All metrics are still important, but it's the mixture of them that allows us to actually measure success and see impact of conversations.

You helped build the social media platform of NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal. Shaq was one of early adopters of social media tools. His retirement video was a game changer. What were your thoughts before Shaq posted the video, how did you see the influence it had on sports and media landscape?

The big thing to know about Shaq's retirement video is that he earned the right to announce it that way. He worked hard every day with his social media accounts to create and build relationships with his fans. His retirement wasn't a public relations stunt. His intent was in the right place, he really just wanted his fans to know first.

You are an advocate of humanizing the brands that are active in social media. There are some great examples of personalities that use social media and represent the brand or organization; like one of your clients Dana White or personalities such as Virgin's Richard Branson and many others. Should there be more personalities representing brands in such ways?

Absolutely. humans connect with humans, not logos. At Digital Royalty, we incorporate this concept into all of our clients' campaigns. The Chicago White Sox, for example, believe in letting fans connect with the humans behind the logo, so the players regularly take calls using what we call a »Fan Phone«. Several times a season, various White Sox players tweet out a phone number so fans can call them and ask questions. Within seconds, fans respond and get to connect with their favorite players. Allowing fans to connect with players on a personal level pushes them up the loyalty ladder. Unforgettable experiences like this keep fans engaged with the brand for the long-term.

> ❯ The big thing to know about Shaq's retirement video is that he earned the right to announce it that way.

You have an amazing number of followers on Twitter – 1.2 million. How important is the »natural« talent in social media, what can be trained and how to start if you are not sure you can be unique?

Everyone has talent, but the important part is to identify what value you offer and how engaging you can be. The golden rule of social media success is to deliver value when, where, and how your audience wants to receive it. A common misconception is that you should try to gain as many followers as possible. Don't focus solely on the number of followers. Instead, focus on having an engaged community of the right followers who are involved in conversations that you want to be a part of. Through my experience, I have seen that influence converts, but impressions do not always convert.

Some of the biggest brands in sports were late adopters of trends. The most paid female athlete Maria Sharapova and one of the NBA bests of all time – Kobe Bryant – have joined Twitter just recently, Manchester United as one of the global football brands is the only Premier League Club that is not active on Twitter yet. Can top clubs, sports properties and sports celebrities (local and global) today avoid social media accounts and still successfully build on their brand and audiences?

Yes, people have been successfully building their brands for years without using social media. However, social communication tools only expedite growth and make people scalable. Conversations and communication are more scalable when using social media, allowing you to connect with more fans in a shorter amount of time. Social media also brings new monetization opportunities, via endorsements and sponsorships, which are important for generating revenue and brand building. With social communication tools you can bypass traditional media outlets and get your message straight to your fans. You own your voice and don't have to risk your message getting changed or diluted by a reporter or some other middleman. This direct access to fans makes social communication tools an excellent way to glean insights into what your fans or customers are really looking for. Normally this kind of research is time-consuming and expensive. Lastly, social media enables your organization to provide a higher level of customer service because more customers can be assisted more efficiently and issues can be dealt with immediately.

> ❯ The golden rule of social media success is to deliver value when, where, and how your audience wants to receive it. A common misconception is that you should try to gain as many followers as possible.

Can we talk about brands and social media brands, the differentiation between the physical and virtual worlds? An athlete could be, for example, more successful in the social media world than on the sporting field. How do you see the differentiation and bridge offline – online?

At Digital Royalty, we believe the magic of social media really happens when you bridge the virtual world and the physical world. Throughout the years, we have done many »social media stunts« like the Fan Phone concept I mentioned earlier, Tweet ups, and »Random Acts of Shaqness«, to name a few. The value and impact of social media interactions is enhanced when they lead to real-world interactions.

Social media is not just about opportunities, but also about hidden dangers. We have seen athletes getting expelled from Olympic teams, footballers getting fined, there were also some criminal investigations connected with social media posts ... What is the best thing an athlete (or their social media ma-

nager) can do, when they realize they have done or written something wrong, inappropriate?

Social media amplifies what already exists. It all comes down to intent. If you make a mistake – like we all do from time to time –, but your intent was in the right place, your followers are more likely to remain loyal. My best advice is to be real, admit the mistake, apologize, and move on. Your followers will respect you more for it. Social media debacles are inevitable, which is why it's important how you handle them. In my experience working with celebrities and athletes, ninety percent of social media mistakes could have been avoided altogether with proper training.

How do you see the future of social media in sports and its challenges?

Social media provides the opportunity for fans to connect more often and more deeply, which increases the value of sponsorships and endorsement deals. Also, another dimension of entertainment can be delivered by including social media into broadcasts, which could impact loyalty. More training is needed. As discussed in the previous question, there are lots of misconceptions about the proper way for athletes to use social communication tools, which is evidenced by the many debacles that happen every year. Another thing to consider is the liability of athletes, coaches, and other spokespeople potentially damaging the brand via social media. Anyone speaking on behalf of the brand should receive some level of training, or you risk having a social media crisis. Another challenge is the lack of an industry

standard for measuring the impact of social media. There is still a perceived gray area for the value of

> ❯ Many teams continue to treat social media as media, but it's not. It's simply communication. Think of it more as the telephone and less as the television. It should be a conversation.

social media. Many teams continue to treat social media as media, but it's not. It's simply communication. Think of it more as the telephone and less as the television. It should be a conversation.

Which is your favorite social media experience in sports and why?

A couple of years ago, I was lucky enough to attend the Women's World Cup in Germany and support the United States Women's Soccer Team as they battled against Japan. It was an incredible experience watching dozens of talented female athletes play for the title of champion while surrounded by thousands of screaming fans. The game itself was thrilling, even though the US lost. What amazed me most was to see how many fans were using social media outlets on their mobile devices to tell their stories virtually. In fact, that memorable event became the most tweeted about event ever at that point in Twitter's history, with 7,196 tweets sent per second.

Amy Jo Martin

CV

Amy Jo Martin is an American author, speaker, entrepreneur, and founder & CEO of Digital Royalty, with headquarters in Las Vegas. Digital Royalty is a social media and education company that helps individuals and brands build, measure and monetize their digital universe. Amy Jo Martin started in sports PR with the NBA's Phoenix Suns. During her time at the Suns, Martin pioneered how NBA teams integrate social media and organized the first ever NBA Tweet Up with Shaquille O'Neal. Martin and O'Neal were of the first accounts on Twitter to become verified. Martin's clients include Dwayne »The Rock« Johnson, Dana White, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Chicago White Sox, FOX Sports, Los Angeles Kings ... Amy Jo Martin is the author of the bestseller Renegades Write the Rules: How the Digital Royalty Use Social Media to Innovate.

Foto: Jill Richards

@SportoConf