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Sports social media messages can be a plus, but also a minus

On Mother's Day, the marketing team for the San Diego Padres learned a valuable lesson about protecting its brand on social media, specifically, Twitter.

The baseball team temporarily changed its Twitter handle from @Padres to @Madres to celebrate moms on their special day. It was a clever brand engagement idea, except the team did more than just change its display name for the day — it changed its whole Twitter handle and failed to immediately protect the @Padres handle in a separate, locked Twitter account, reported USA Today and other outlets.

An observant fan quickly jumped in and grabbed the now-available @Padres handle. Ricky Padilla relinquished the handle a few hours later, but not before the Padres earned a spot on the growing list of social media mistakes in sports.

The Padres' Twitter takeover illustrates that while social media has its rewards for savvy marketers, it also carries significant risks.

Leagues, teams and players, as well as brands, use social media accounts across multiple platforms, many with millions of followers, to share information and interact with sports fans. An active social media presence has become an essential part of just about every sport's brand marketing plan.

The @Padres/Madres incident is noteworthy because of the tight security that generally surrounds sports organizations' social media accounts. Literally losing control of an account doesn't happen very often.

What does occur with surprising frequency are posts that someone simply didn't think through. Many of these faux pas are harmless; others can get an athlete or organization in real trouble.

Adidas' congratulatory email to customers who finished the Boston Marathon in 2017 went viral on Twitter for all the wrong reasons.

The sports apparel giant sent emails with the subject line: "Congrats, you survived the Boston Marathon!" But customers immediately tweeted at Adidas to point out that its well-intentioned message could be taken as



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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insensitive and making light of the runners who had survived the 2013 bombing at the race's finish line that killed three people and injured more than 260 others. Adidas immediately apologized.

In another cringeworthy social media moment, the St. Louis Cardinals alienated a good chunk of its fans in 2017 while commemorating the 50th anniversary of its World Series win over the Boston Red Sox. To promote its upcoming giveaway of replica '67 World Series championship rings, the Cardinals tweeted: "You love baseball, she loves jewelry. On May 17th, it's a win-win." Female baseball fans were not happy and the resulting backlash over the sexist sentiment made headlines around the country, noted the website Sports Business Daily. The Cardinals deleted the tweet.

Then there's the thoughtless social media

activity that could wreck international relations. All the Baltimore Ravens social media team wanted to do was show off its virtual face-painting app and rally fans ahead of a game against the Jacksonville Jaguars in London.

So, they decided to emblazon a photo of Queen Elizabeth II with the Ravens logo and tweet it out. The United Kingdom's Advertising Standards Agency Committee of Advertising Practice Code frowns on using the royal family in marketing materials without permission, according to The (Baltimore) Sun. The photo was promptly deleted.

Athletes who actively post on their social media accounts can gain a tremendous number of followers. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo, the soccer superstar who plays for Italy's Juventus and captains Portugal's national team heads the list of most popular athletes on social media, with 122.5 million friends on Facebook and 76.4 million Twitter followers, says website Sportology.

Star athletes can be great brand ambassadors for a team. But while teams benefit from their players' popularity, they have only marginal control over individual athletes who post about their lives on and off the field. Controversial opinions and activities, as well as social media slipups, can damage an athlete's image — and by extension, the team's brand.

In an odd situation recently, fans and some media outlets "discovered" that Golden State Warriors forward Kevin Durant may have a Twitter account under a fake name.

In a tweet from his official account, Durant criticized a former coach and teammates on the Oklahoma City Thunder. From the content and the wording of the tweet (including referring to himself in the third person), fans concluded Durant meant to tweet from a fake account but forgot to log out of his official account, The Los Angeles Times reported.

Durant's mild social media gaffe may have amused many in the world of professional basketball but, what players say on social media can have more serious consequences.

In esports — a rapidly expanding sport where many players have quickly shot to fame online — a players' communities of fans drive engagement and help build players' individual brands. As esports attracts more mainstream sponsors, teams and leagues are becoming less tolerant of players' controversial comments on social media.

Earlier this year, the Overwatch League suspended Dallas Fuel player Felix "xQc" Lengyel, after he let fly a string of obscenities on Houston Outlaws player Austin "Muma" Wilmot during a post-game stream, reports esports website Gamerant.

control of the message can be tricky. Responses from fans, other players and teams and other brands can be highly unpredictable and take the dialogue in unexpected directions.

Nike has proven to be adept at successfully navigating the risk of controversial advertising, notably (but not exclusively) with its recent campaign featuring former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick and the tagline: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

In embracing Kaepernick's stance on social justice, Nike drew heated criticism on

that someone, somewhere has taken a screenshot.

Social media success also depends on how athletes and organizations handle the inevitable social media blunder — and in today's digital world, they really are inevitable. The Padres response to the brief loss of the @Padres handle stands as a great example of how to turn a blunder into a social media win.

Responding to a tweet by Padilla after the team had secured the @Padres twitter handle, the Padres thanked him for "keeping the @Padres safe" and offered him — and his



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The graphic language violated the league's community standards. In another incident, the HavoK esports team fired Fortnite player Jordan "Scubby" Selleck for comments he made about people who threatened to commit suicide.

Although Selleck later created a YouTube video apologizing, some esports fans doubted his sincerity, according to Gamerant.

One of the biggest concerns about using social media in sports marketing is maintaining control of the conversation. Because social media is an open conversation, rather than one-way communication, staying in

social media and videos of consumers burning its sneakers in protest. In the end, though, Nike seems to have come out strong — it remains the National Football League's official apparel sponsor and supplier of jerseys and game-day apparel for all 32 teams.

Another social media risk factor is the fact that the internet really is forever. Many an athlete — and team — has been embarrassed when, following a significant sports triumph or rise to fame, old and less than flattering social media posts and tweets come to light. And even if the offending post or tweet is deleted, the chances are pretty high

"madre and padre" tickets to a future home game. The Twittersphere heartily approved of the team's move.

Social media has proved to be an invaluable tool for engaging sports fans, publicizing league, team and player ventures and building brands.

As social media platforms grow and evolve, new opportunities will emerge to captivate audiences and test social media marketing teams' savvy. One thing won't change, however — the medium's inherent unpredictability can be both exciting and nerve-wracking, but will never be boring.