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New social media marketing site gives little guy athletes a spotlight

Athletes have been treated as bona fide celebrities for decades with marquee players achieving a similar level of fame as music and acting luminaries. Yet relatively few athletes hit this celebrity stratosphere and, in general, athletes tend to struggle more than other celebrities and influencers to build their own personal brands.

Noncelebrity influencers on Instagram, YouTube and other social media gain significant followings, but lesser-known athletes seem to have a harder time building social media followings, which has become vital to brand-building.

One athlete marketing platform developer — opendorse — believes it holds the key to promoting athletes at all levels through social media content creation and distribution: Technology that enables individual athletes to become content creators and distributors for sports-minded sponsors.

Both sports superstars and lesser-known players are benefiting from the concept to raise their visibility, the company says.

According to opendorse, more than 8,000 athletes currently use the platform to communicate with more than 1 billion social media followers. The company grew by 50 percent in 2018 and a new round of investor funding announced in June is intended to keep the momentum going, says opendorse. In fact, the company believes it's on track to be the world leader in sports content by the end of this year.

The athlete marketing platform model is paving the way for brand partnerships that focus on athletes in a way that some critics say traditional social media marketing cannot. Star athletes may be part of the celebrity universe as music and acting stars, but the nature of their fame is quite different, according to Adweek. While all celebrities feed the 24/7 constant social media cycle of entertainment news and engagement, star athletes function differently.



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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Sports figures lag behind other celebrities when it comes to building a personal brand partly because their athletic careers tend to be much shorter than the careers of television, movie and music stars. As Adweek points out, athletes also tend to rely on traditional sports agencies to build their images and audiences, but these agencies may lack the expertise in building enduring brands and creating compelling content. And without a strong presence, it can be difficult to attract and sustain corporate partnerships, says Adweek.

The National Basketball Association helped pave the way for the independent creation of media products in 2017 when it launched the NBA Content Network. The network gives all 30 NBA teams and approximately 200 partners access to the NBA's video, images, news and data and social media content, all of which can be quickly searched and downloaded on game nights.

A few players have taken the concept a

step further by becoming their own media platforms.

Kevin Durant, the Brooklyn Nets forward, launched Thirty Five Media to create and distribute, not only content about his own career but features about his business and charitable projects. Durant announced on his own platform that he was joining the Nets and has formed numerous content production partnerships.

Last year, for example, Thirty Five Media and ESPN joined forces to develop the series "The Boardroom," to bring fans behind the scenes of the sports business world. Thirty Five Media also has plans to help other athletes create their own YouTube channels and content.

The Player's Tribune, founded by former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, has become an influential voice for athletes. The platform publishes articles by other athletes, videos and podcasts about a range of sports, both in the U.S. and globally, to connect directly with fans.

Of course, star power doesn't guarantee success. In 2015, NBA superstar Steph Curry of the Golden State Warriors launched his own athlete social media marketing platform called Slyce.

Slyce organized and filtered fan questions, automated posting of users' content on a variety of social media platforms, provided insight about how fans engage with content and worked with athletes and their sponsors to develop social media campaigns, according to the website GeekWire. But Curry shut Slyce down in 2018 because the platform couldn't attract enough athletes to use the platform consistently, GeekWire reported.

Democratizing the concept of an athlete media platform appears to be where opendorse stands out. It appeals to entrepreneurial-minded athletes who don't have eight-figure salaries or endorsement deals and still want to generate a range of revenue streams after their playing days are over.

Launched in 2012 and based in Lincoln, Neb., opendorse announced in June that it raised \$3.1 million from investors and revamped its platform to enable users to share content to an unlimited number of channels and social media platforms. The new opendorse includes a streamlined partner-to-athlete communication channel that allows parties to share feedback and automates the content approval and distribution processes.

As an opendorse user as well as an investor, Prince Amukamara, a cornerback for the Chicago Bears, is an ambassador of sorts for the platform. The company was founded by two of Amukamara's former teammates at the University of Nebraska, placekicker Adi Kunalic and linebacker Blake Lawrence.

While Amukamara has a successful NFL career and is a motivational speaker, as he told the website SportTechie, athletes

with a strong platform of their own tend to attract more business opportunities.

Using opendorse, Amukamara recently partnered with Juice Stop, a smoothie establishment that he often patronized when he attended the University of Nebraska, using the platform to capitalize on Amukamara's strong Twitter presence to promote both the store and the athlete himself.

Opendorse partners include the players associations for the National Football League, Major League Baseball, Professional Golfers' Association and the Women's National Basketball Association as well as numerous professional sports teams and college athletics programs.

Brands on board include Allstate, Citi, Pepsi, EA Sports, Campbell's, Marriott, Procter & Gamble and Wendy's, according to opendorse.

While opendorse has scaled rapidly, it's

likely that rival platforms soon will be seeking to emulate its success and put their own spin on the concept.

One of opendorse's biggest strengths is building social media partnerships with a stable of athletes who are not superstars but want to develop a unique brand of their own. Competing platforms will need to figure out how to attract these athletes and help them create their own voice or niche on social media.

As Adweek explains, athletes gain attention through their in-game performances; endorsement deals come later. The athlete marketing platforms that can help players create and sustain a personal brand that appeals to a particular audience and are not dependent on their game stats will have a much broader pool of athletes available to work with than platforms that work only with the most elite names.