

How social media - when authentic - can propel footballers into the big leagues

By John McCarthy, The Drum - 23 October 2017 07:00am

Influencers are in right now, they command power, influence and respect, and as such it was only a matter of time until top footballers had to hijack the craze, with markedly varying results.

Social media accounts serve as engagement channels and commercial platforms, they enable footballers to control the narrative and build an affinity with fans.

Most of the world's top footballers are utilising social media although there seems to be some disagreement about the best ways to operate. Across most accounts is one definite trait.

Authenticity

This is the key to building a relationship with fans argues Robin Clarke, global head of Publicis Media Sport and Entertainment.

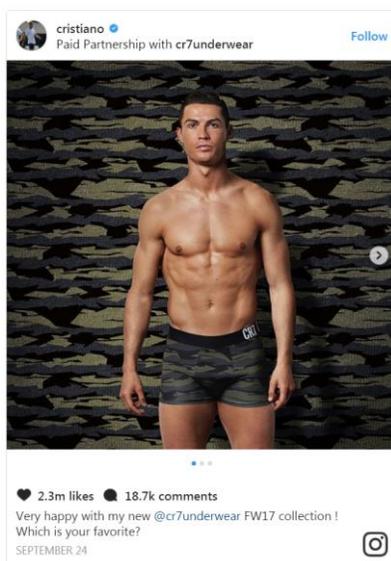
No one is falling for Harry Redknapp's love of mobile cryptocurrency.

Proper excited about Mobile Cryptocurrency! I'm in, get involved!

<https://t.co/mvHfi14Z2G@electroneum#Electroneum>

— Harry Redknapp (@Redknapp) October 12, 2017

How loyal is Cristiano Ronaldo to his CRZ pants brand?



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BZbhy8PI5-Y/?taken-by=cristiano>

Is he an advocate of Clear for Men anti-dandruff shampoo?



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BZWhDjsF0v6/?taken-by=cristiano>

Or doing... something... with Egyptian steel?



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BZO5LsaF19P/?taken-by=cristiano>

The Drum spoke to Publicis Media Sport and Entertainment's Clarke to get a feel for what makes the most alluring social media activations from footballers, what behaviour is working, and what has to be shown the red card.

With one apparent exception, there is one connecting thread behind the successful posts kicking up a fuss on social media, Clarke says: "Authenticity is the most important word when it comes to driving real engagement and growth."

He adds that it is the belief that the "content and the language and the type of content is coming from the player" that cultivates engagement. However, it is clear, more often than not, the content comes from a practitioner of PR and social media. Where this relationship can work is when there is real insight from the footballer and a PR polish (and more often than not emoji) from the social media guru.

Once the right tune is struck, accounts can be used to drive value for brands. However, Clarke says fans "don't want to be bombarded by commercial messages from players - they are accepting of them, that is football, but a balance has to be struck."

The Ronaldo Factor

And that brings us to five-time Ballon d'Or winner, Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo, his star power has transformed his social media feed into quite the commercial driver.

He is arguably the exception to the authenticity rule. Research from Publicis Media Sport & Entertainment (PMSE) and partner Blinkfire Analytics, ranked footballers according to its social performance index (SPI), Ronaldo placed at the top, measured across on-pitch performance, transfer speculation, deals and quality of content. He was followed by Neymar, Messi, Asensio, Mbappé, Ramos, Marcelo, Pogba, Benzema, Bale and Dybala.

Ronaldo's social performance could be classed as an anomaly, the frequency of his commercial posts are approximately three times more than an industry average – this should be a turn off to fans.

"A proliferation of brand partners will serve players very well financially, but flooding Instagram with commercial posts can start to dilute the quality of the account," says Clarke. From a storytelling perspective, it is worth looking at the work of French striker Karim Benzema, reveals Clarke.

The player is unmatched in the significant uplift he sees in the off-season. He lifts a veil on select moments from his personal life, giving fans deeper insight into his routine off the pitch. There are a lot of flashy cars, gym work and family moments.



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BWHxzHvB9Ac/?taken-by=karimbenzema>

On what brands and clubs are getting out of these associations, Clarke offered: "Footballers offer new marketing channels for clubs and sponsors, and are also increasingly attractive to other third-party brands as they build influencer programs and recruit trusted brand advocates in the increasingly fragmented media space."

The space is changing too, there is a new generation of footballers coming up usurping an old guard of brand favourites like Zlatan Ibrahimovich who has dropped precipitously down the table. Replacing him is the likes of Paul Pogba who Clarke assures is shaping the future of the sector.

"It is very clear to me Pogba has a very serious social media plan in place in terms of how he is creating and what platforms he is using. His involvement in Lukaku's move did wonderful things for Lukaku, Manchester United and even Adidas."

Pogba's high profile move to Manchester United was announced with a co-branded music video from Stormzy, Adidas helped deliver.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jfn-U6EGzU>



He continues: "Pogba is the player we look at as the one behaving most like a brand, the dynamism, the creativity and the newer fresher approach."

Pogba is among the players assuming control of their accounts (at least to a degree). There are palpable dangers in getting caught leaning on third parties to handle the PR side. Most recently, Instagram offered the framework for the latest, heart-in-mouth fail. The Instagram account of Manchester City player John Stones congratulated Chelsea striker Morata for putting away a hat trick against Stoke. It appeared to be a log-in error from a red-faced PR rather than an unusual display of admiration from rival players - such instances can erode brand equity, if fans don't feel like the channels are a direct comms route to the player.

Where to play?

Clarke offers a bit of insight on the best platforms for footballers to go all-in on. "We haven't seen an example where Instagram is not the runaway winner right now, in terms of driving engagement, it offers two-to-three times more. You get greater reach and scale through Facebook and Twitter but post-by-post Instagram wins.

"It is a more creative platform more image and content led, it is just delivered, our clients talking to us about campaigns put Instagram as the number one platform to negotiate in."

There's an elephant in the room here. Snapchat. It is a credible platform to be on Clarke asserts but at the moment, there is not enough feedback coming back from the platform on how each post performs.

"Snapchat has an incredibly credible place within this suite of social media but it is harder to put your finger on, you are advising brands on what you can't see clearly."

Brands and clubs are increasingly gauging footballer social media accounts as negotiating bargaining chips when forming partnerships.

The football social media scene especially found new life this year during the transfer window with numerous zany announcement videos, at the time The Drum touched down with those blazing the way in the trend.