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## 'D-Will' tries cutting out the middle man

ositive press is not always guaranteed, even for marquee players covered widely in both the regional and national sports media. That's why Brooklyn Nets point guard Deron Williams has his own press corps — a credentialed reporter that attends just about every Nets home game. Unlike the other sports writers at Nets games, however, this reporter doesn't file his stories with national print or online publications like Sports Illustrated or ESPN.com. He's not at the Nets games to cover the team and he doesn't write in depth about other Nets players.

Instead, Devon Jeffreys, the content coordinator for the digital branding agency Athlete Interactive, attends Nets games as a member of the media for the sole purpose of writing game stories, features and other articles that focus almost exclusively on "D-Will," as Williams is known to fans. And as Jeffreys' press credentials indicate, the stories he writes gets published on Williams' own website, DeronWilliams.com, which was created and is maintained by Jeffreys' employer.

Generating more positive visibility by distributing content through athletes' "owned" media is not a new marketing technique. The rise of social media has led to the expanded use of channels such as Facebook and Twitter for both individual athletes and teams.

For many athletes — Williams included — Twitter is the platform of choice to connect with fans, whether the athletes tweet themselves or have a dedicated social media manager create and manage the content for them. (D-Will's Twitter handle is @DeronWilliams and he has about 325,00 followers.) Some teams and individual athletes also maintain Facebook pages — Williams' Facebook page has amassed about 461,000 likes.



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Individual athlete websites are not the norm, however, And even more unusual is a personal website that goes beyond a collection of static content, occasionally refreshed. Williams' website not only includes some fairly standard elements - biographical information, college playing history, information about his foundation, Point of Hope, and a media gallery (which features a collection of media mentions, pictures and videos) but it also includes regularly updated articles and features, most of which focus on his performance in the latest game.

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most of the articles include quotes from him on the game, his performance and the performance of the team. Some stories also include material from other media — such as embedded video or copies of tweets from fans and commentators - and all of the game reporting includes links to articles from national and regional press about Williams, the Nets, and the game. In creating and regularly providing fans with fresh content written by his own, dedicated reporter, through his own website, Williams and his agent, Excel Sports Management, have raised both sports marketing and the Nets star to a new level which is exactly what they intended.

DeronWilliams.com launched in 2011 after the Utah Jazz traded the point guard to the then-New  $\overline{J}$ ersey  $\overline{N}$ ets, as a way of amping up the player's visibility in his new home market and enhancing his marketability to sponsors, reportedly because D-Will's representatives felt he was not as well-known outside of his former home court market. The website was also instrumental in keeping Williams front and center with the fans and sponsors during last season's NBA lockout, when he played in the European league.

While the reporting that Jeffreys, a former newspaper sports writer, does for Williams is really more content marketing than hard-core sports writing, Williams and his representatives don't just plaster the site with story after story of his triumphs. Rather, a review of the site reveals carefully crafted stories covering wins, losses and challenges — all told from the vantage point of his participation in those games, with ample quotes from the point guard, all the while with as positive a spin as possible (at least for Williams).

The site offers him something he can't get from "earned" media (the various regional and national outlets that cover the NBA and the Nets) — complete control over content including what's reported, how it's spun and when it appears. Williams and Athletes Interactive use the site strategically, drawing positive attention, reporting frequently on his successes, both on and off the court, as well as deflecting negative attention by reportedly "laying low" when necessary.

Are personalized athlete websites effective marketing tools and will they become a trend? Although it's hard to discern exactly how much impact D-Will's website and its positive press may have, Forbes magazine recently named Williams one of its "30 Under 30" in sports, the publication's annual list of the most influential young names in the sports industry.

Whether individual athletes' websites become a trend also remains to be seen. Certainly, given the effort and expense required to continually maintain the site in the comprehensive way that Williams and Athletes Interactive maintains DeronWilliams.com, personal websites may not be an effective marketing tool for most athletes. Nonetheless, Athletes Interactive reportedly maintains about 20 sites for athletes, although none as comprehensive as D-Will's ... yet.