

FRONT OFFICE SPORTS

The revolution will not be televised.

It's a song, it's a cliché and it's 100 percent the truth when it comes to the way in which sports teams connect with their fans today. In the digital age, no longer can franchises sit back and let local and national television outlets provide the coverage of their team. Fans crave more. Two minutes on a local sportscast, a few highlights on "SportsCenter" and a blurb on the ESPN Bottomline — it just isn't enough to feed the insatiable appetite for team-related content.

As the fan passion has bubbled over like an unattended boiling pot, organizations are beginning to understand the power in controlling their own narrative while providing unprecedented inside access to their fan base. The best part for teams? No longer do you need to own a newspaper, television station or radio signal to do it. In today's digital age, the barriers to entry have all but disappeared.

One of the organizations at the forefront of this is the Arizona Cardinals.

The NFL team is no stranger to blazing trails on the digital media front. Eleven years ago, before it was a popular trend among teams, the organization decided to hire newspaperman Darren Urban, who had been covering the team for the local East Valley Tribune, as their digital beat writer. The move was the first of many that set the progressive agenda for the team's internal media team.

““We're not worried yet about numbers, or selling sponsorships to it. We want to make it a destination for fans before all that.” – Tim DeLaney, Vice President of Broadcast/Digital Content for the Cardinals

The Cardinals didn't stop there though. They embraced content created specifically for social and digital platforms and even new streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Facebook Watch. Unlike some organizations who manage up to get aggressive digital strategies approved, Arizona's approach starts at the top.

“The expansion of the digital department really took off after 'All or Nothing: A Season with the Arizona Cardinals,’” said Cardinals Vice President of Broadcast/Digital Content Tim DeLaney, when speaking of the Amazon reality series. “That's because that's when [team president] Michael Bidwill really saw the value, if he didn't before, of a non-traditional platform and giving your fans content through those mediums.”

The next chapter of that legacy unfurled earlier this summer with the announcement of a new digital show called “Cover2.” The concept is simple: Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday throughout the year on Twitter, YouTube Live, and AzCardinals.com, the show will cover the news of the day about the team with true “insiders” perspectives.

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To fill the role of said insiders, the Cardinals once again dipped into the local media talent pool hiring veteran radio men Craig Grialou and Mike Jurecki who had most recently worked for the team's flagship station KMVP 98.7 FM.

"Mike [Jurecki] had been doing a little bit of postgame radio for us for the last couple of years and Craig has been hosting some radio for us, so because I knew them personally, I wasn't hesitant," DeLaney said of hiring reporters for the new digital project from conventional media. "I mean, it's a conversation you have to have since it's a little bit of a slightly different approach working for a team than what they would know take from being part of the conventional media."

From the team perspective the decision to add two talented members to the digital staff was an easy one, but how about the decision to go from being a reporter to being a team employee? Grialou said it has been a fresh challenge but a welcomed one.

"You're embedded, so to speak, with the team," Grialou explained. "So that's completely brand new. I've never had that experience before and being behind the scenes and having more access than I did before, but the Cardinals have made it a very easy, very smooth transition and then just knowing a lot of people already over here and several familiar faces it hasn't been a big deal."

One of the most unique aspects of the show is just how fan friendly it truly is. Delaney and his team have embraced social media not only as a platform to broadcast the show on but a way to get questions directly from fans and also a way to promote the show. The efforts by not only those involved in "Cover2" but also the entire social team have made the Cardinal faithful feel like insiders themselves.

"The social media interaction was because part of the appeal of hiring Mike Jurecki is that he has such a following of people that have been listening to him for more than 20 years," DeLaney shared. "So I think giving him that a direct pipeline to fans was important."

The hosts understand that fan interaction is part of the lifeblood of the show and have embraced being able to address the most burning questions the team's social following has about upcoming games, roster moves and anything else that comes to mind.

As with any major team initiative, there are goals and metrics that will determine success. While sales numbers are usually the driving force behind many decisions teams make, Delaney and the higher-ups with the Cardinals are taking a different, and honestly refreshing, approach to their expectation for "Cover2."

"If we hear from the avid fans that they love it, that's success to me," DeLaney explained. "We're not worried yet about numbers, or selling sponsorships to it. We want to make it a destination for fans before all that."