

Interview With Pat Donahue, Coordinator of Digital Media, Los Angeles Kings

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Pat Donahue has been with the Los Angeles Kings since the 2010–11 season, working mostly with databases as an intern. The following summer, Dewayne Hankins, the director of digital media and LAKINGS.com, invited Donahue to assist with the organization's social-media efforts, including the official site and the Kings' presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and its mobile app. Donahue's first season as a full-time employee—"quite a year to start," according to Donahue—saw the franchise win its first Stanley Cup, with the likes of Mashable and Yahoo! Sports' Puck Daddy blog taking note of the Kings' social-media efforts.

Zimmerman: What is the ultimate goal of the Kings' social-media efforts? Is there a certain mandate or set of rules from team management regarding what kind of information and comments you can post? What is the editing/approval process, if any, like?

Donahue: Our goal is engagement. Sure, you can have 4 million followers but if you aren't starting conversations you're leaving out the "social" part. Wow, I sound like a Mashable article. We just try to have a personality. We don't want to be an RSS feed regurgitating information. Luckily, Dewayne and I have a very similar sense of humor, and people usually can't tell who is posting what, even though on a few occasions I had to shake my head at a "joke" Dewayne was trying to make in a post. In terms of editing or approval, every now and then he'll send me a tweet or I'll run one by him just to make sure it's funny to more than one person. He'll think something is funny and I'll hate it, or I'll think something is "crossing the line" and he'll say go for it. It's just common sense, really.

Same goes with the approval from management. Before I got here, Dewayne spent hours convincing everyone this is the way he wanted to do it, and ever since then they love it. I came in, my first game running the Twitter account alone was against the Ducks, and Dewayne just said be "snarky." I think there was one thing I wanted to say and sent it to him and he vetoed it. Other than that, it's just been very natural. People criticize it, saying we run it like it's our personal accounts, but we are much funnier on @LAKings.

Zimmerman: The Tweet that really served notice regarding the outside-the-box approach of @LAKings was probably the “You’re Welcome” message after the first-round defeat of the Canucks (“To everyone in Canada outside of BC, you’re welcome”). Was there a feeling that just as people were taking notice of the team’s performance, it was important to retain the new interest online through being clever, and perhaps a bit irreverent?

Donahue: Not at all. Sadly, Twitter doesn’t really have the ability to go back very far, but it’s been this way since the beginning of the 10–11 season when Dewayne took over. I came on, and I think we’ve pushed the envelope, as we’re just very sarcastic people and find humor in people getting upset online. Earlier in that Game 1, I said all sorts of things, including calling out certain players for embellishment. Everybody’s thinking it, I guess we are just the first “official” account to say it. People appreciate that. My “You’re Welcome” tweet was just a continuation on what we had been doing. We underestimated the massive response it would garner, especially with all the Canadian media. In no way was it irreverent, I was just sitting at home watching that game and seeing floods of tweets from all across Canada: people saying “I’m a die-hard Oilers fan, lifelong Leafs fan, Habs fan, but I’m cheering for the Kings,” and that’s just amazing. I really didn’t think much of it at the time, but just wanted to say thank you to everyone who was cheering for the Kings probably for the first time, and also take a little jab at the Canucks. This is sports; when did everyone get so serious about it? The death threats were a little much. . . .

Zimmerman: Was there a certain moment when you knew that the Kings’ Twitter feed was gaining not only attention, but perhaps notoriety? Is there a Tweet you wish you could take back?

Donahue: Well, last time numbers were pulled, the “You’re welcome BC” Tweet was the 10th-most retweeted Tweet of all time, right behind our president. So that really kicked things off. It was on every broadcast and in every paper across Canada, and even appeared in U.S. publications. Which for hockey, is an accomplishment. When I saw it on *SportsCenter*, I knew this was something massive. I have a huge stack of articles on my desk about it. Front page of TSN online. I remember even one site had a poll on their front page asking if people thought it was offensive or not. Just ridiculous how that Tweet spread. I think the next 3 days we sat in front of our computers reading replies; never seen anything like that before. We couldn’t keep up with our timeline.

The only Tweets I take back are misspellings. People jump all over that stuff, but in the end it really doesn’t matter.

Zimmerman: As the playoffs continued, Yahoo! Sports and the blogosphere took notice of your efforts. Did other teams respond through their own social media?

Donahue: Sadly, no. We really tried and mentioned other teams as much as we could. Especially when we played the Blues. It just so happened Kopitar and Perron were facing off for the NHL 13 (video game) cover vote. I love that game, so we really pushed it. We came out with one-sided facts about how Kopitar is better than Perron, we really threw all the punches. At one point David even tweeted out

why aren't the Blues helping him, but they never responded. We also realize we are lucky to have a management that believes in what we are doing and gives us the freedom to do the things we do. Most teams don't have that. Sometimes we get criticized for "throwing rocks at a dog on a leash" if you will, but hopefully other teams see what we do and the growth we have, and sports social media can really evolve. People absolutely love Twitter accounts of professional teams going at it, even if it's just two people in offices a thousand miles apart.

Really, it was just a perfect storm for us. The Kings tore through the playoffs, so it never gave anyone any ammunition. We could be arrogant, cocky, and say whatever we wanted because we were winning. We aren't the team—hockey players are the most humble athletes in the world—but this is Twitter and our job is to stir up conversation. It's our first cup in 45 years. You bet we are going to be boastful until it's delivered to another team.

Zimmerman: Were you surprised by the overall reaction (fans, bloggers, players, etc.) to the Kings' use of social media during the playoffs?

Donahue: Yes. I never could have imagined the growth we experienced this year. We are two guys just writing about what we see in sarcastic and snarky ways. We knew it was different and our fans liked it but never expected it to be the talking point of the playoffs. When Puck Daddy, and Mashable, Deadspin, TSN, CBC start writing about how different we are and how effective it is, it really started to sink in. Luckily, the team kept winning, and we never had to slow down.

Zimmerman: The Kings received a lot of attention for the infographic that featured, among other things, explanations of the differences between the Kings' logo and mascot and that of the NBA's Sacramento Kings. What was the thought process behind creating that infographic, subtitled "With all of the confusion going on lately, we thought we'd set things straight"? And what kind of reaction did you get?

Donahue: The infographic was funny. Day after day, we were seeing stuff like that, reporters saying Drew Doty and Alex Kopitar shooting balls into the net, and showing pictures of the Sacramento logo and mascot. It got to the point where we thought we should address it. Dwayne came to me and said "Hey, we should make a funny infographic." An hour later, without much review, we threw it online and it spread like wildfire. I think it was our most viewed page, and the infographic is pretty terrible. It has no style or graphic expertise that some of these awesome ones people share online do. But it's funny and it just came out when all that stuff was at a peak and everyone wanted to talk about it.

Zimmerman: In the Los Angeles market, the Kings have always had support (especially since the Gretzky trade), but the franchise has always had to battle for attention and coverage with the more entrenched Lakers and Dodgers. How does this affect your efforts, and that of your colleagues?

Donahue: I don't think it does. If we were put in charge of the Lakers' or Dodgers' digital media, we would run it the same way, at least I would hope. We don't think of ourselves as the underdogs or the small guys in town. The building is sold out every night, and this is during last season when things really weren't looking

so great on the ice. L.A. is a sports town, and there are plenty of people to satisfy all the teams.

Zimmerman: Can you quantify how much of an increase in interest there has been in your efforts? Is it a case of “Hey, we’ve always been doing this; everyone just noticed because the team performed well!”?

Donahue: We had a record year in every metric that we keep. Across LAKings.com, Kings Vision, Twitter, Facebook, and our mobile app, we blew apart every goal set at the beginning of the season.

When we can post a jab at a different team in the off-season, and it gets 400 retweets in a few hours, you know people are still interested. Yes, part of that is because we are the Stanley Cup champs, but people are looking to what we say because we are giving them interesting content.

Zimmerman: What is the biggest lesson you and your colleagues learned regarding social media during the Kings’ run?

Donahue: Talk like a person, not a computer, and that no one really has the answer. You can retweet all the Mashable posts you want and participate in discussions where people talk about “what to do in social media!” But there is no definitive “This is how social should be done.” What we do will work for some brands, won’t for others. We got lucky in that we were winning, and people caught on. After we won Game 1 against the Canucks, if we lost four in a row, none of this happens, no one would care.

One thing that every brand, business, and team can do is have a personality. Twitter is not just your press releases; it’s not an RSS feed. Recently @Tacobell took a jab at @OldSpice on Twitter, and the exchange was everywhere. I don’t eat at Taco Bell or use Old Spice, but I’m following both of them to see what they have to say.

People love when we talk to other teams, but when one of them actually responds it becomes legendary. We can’t even keep up with the Tweets of people saying “The @LAKings and @theNYRangers are having a Twitter war!” even though we are just having fun. Never take the Internet too seriously.

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