



rules of engagement

I discovered Bryan Srabian on Twitter while doing what most productive males do every night – perusing through sports sites. To my disappointment, I quickly learned he worked for the San Francisco Giants. I did what no Dodgers fan would ever do – I followed him. He followed me back. And then, things got serious. Quick.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Armen Poghosyan**

Bryan Srabian

Bryan Srabian is the Director of Social Media for the San Francisco Giants. The savvy executive has worked several jobs for the team since graduating from Santa Clara University with a bachelor's degree in science marketing. Srabian started out as a media relations intern in 1995. He was then Manager of Game Entertainment from 1998-2005, instilling such traditions as "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" after

home victories and "Orange Fridays" throughout the ballpark and city. He became Director of Marketing in 2005 before leaving in 2008 to work as the Vice President of Marketing for the Sacramento River Cats (Oakland A's Triple-A affiliate). He is currently an adjunct professor at the University of San Francisco, teaching master's courses on social media in the sports management program.

Long gone are the days when people meet the old-fashioned way. You know, face-to-face, in person... without online intervention.

Bryan and I had a prototypical 21st century meeting. It began on our computers and smart phones with emails and text messages and culminated with a meeting in a distal land 380 miles away.

All this was completely normal – and fitting – because Bryan Srabian is the Director of Social Media for the San Francisco Giants, owners of two of the last three World Series trophies. Srabian is responsible for managing the team's online community, which ranks among the most popular in baseball.

After our initial "follows," I sent him a DM. For the non-Twitterati, that stands for "direct message." I asked for

We take a seat in the upper deck with the World Baseball Classic playing out in front of us. It is March 18, twenty years to the day when the 20-point underdog Santa Clara, led by freshman Steve Nash, became only the second No. 15 seeded team to oust a No. 2 two team when they beat Arizona in the 1993 NCAA Tournament.

Then Srabian, a University of Santa Clara alum, begins to explain the story of another underdog and relative unknown who came and captured the hearts – and fingers – of the world like no one ever could.

He begins to talk about social media.

Sports franchises and the players they employ are often the fabric and representation of their community. The advent of social media in the last 10 years has given

"Once you establish your voice and humanize your brand, you give fans exclusive behind-the-scenes content, and they feel like they are part of the inside," says Srabian.

his email address so that we could take the exchange to levels exceeding 140 characters. Srabian obliged.

Ten days after our online correspondence, he greets me on the Embarcadero in San Francisco in front of Juan Marichal's statue. To my delight, instead of a Marichal bat, he greets me with a big smile, firm handshake and a bro-hug double-back-tap-combo.

The online barriers are broken. We walk inside the ballpark I promised myself I'd wholeheartedly dislike throughout my seven-hour drive up the 101.

Srabian walks me through the club level and points at a picture of Henry, his youngest son. Henry's face is covered with orange and black championship confetti and jubilation. I can't help but admire the sight, hoping one day, I too can be Henry, only doused in Dodgers blue confetti.

Just after breaking the friendship barrier, I end up breaking my earlier promise to hate this place once I catch the smell of brats and garlic fries wafting throughout the concourse.

organizations the luxury of building the profiles of their players as well as the team brand to demographics in their fan base they once couldn't reach.

Like a Barry Bonds home run deep into the waters of McCovey Cove, the days of social media escaping everyday vernacular is outta here!

As the Director of Social Media for the Giants, Srabian uses online platforms to highlight the eccentric personalities of a team that's seemingly winning in every facet of baseball.

Facebook is nine-years old, Twitter is seven, Pinterest is three, Google+ is two and Instagram is at a raw and flourishing 19 months old. Add them all up, and it doesn't even total the age of most of the executives who try to make sense of it.

The 40-year-old gate-keeping guru is in the fourth year of a position essentially created for him. He's helped to build the Giants' Facebook and Twitter accounts to a current ranking of third best in Major League Baseball with a combined audience of over

two million, trailing only the Yankees and Red Sox. Srabian understands the city's eclectic culture, fan base and the 130-year-old Giants brand – and he successfully merges them all together. San Francisco lends itself to individuality and diverse characters. The Giants themselves are a band of misfits – like the reigning \$167 million MVP Buster Posey, the perfect-game-throwing \$127 million ace Matt Cain, two-time Cy Young Award winner Tim Lincecum, Pablo “Kung Fu Panda” Sandoval, the guitar-playing yogi Barry Zito, and prankster Sergio Romo. Some of the digital strategies they've implemented to highlight the cast are special giveaways, Twitter chats, live stream question and answers, viral videos and even having fans tweet their phone numbers to get a call from a player.

But there is no cut and paste formula for managing quirkiness and alternate personas. What works for the Giants might not work for another team, says Srabian. But one thing is certain – the Giants always seem to set themselves up for scoring positions. Companies sign countless checks buying software and consultants in search of an online strategy and vision, but if people like Srabian don't live and breathe the brand they're promoting, consider it null and void.

“Once you establish your voice and humanize your brand, you give fans exclusive behind-the-scenes

a follow back, retweet or reply from their favorite players, which is just as flattering as an autograph nowadays.

“The important thing is to listen to the fans in real time because getting people to buy in makes it that much stronger.”

Srabian would have his work cut out for him if the Giants were the Houston Astros. But they're not. His 2010 and 2012 World Series rings are a memento of working in Pleasantville despite the fact that he rarely sports them.

“It's a reminder of why we do what we do,” he says of the bling, noting that his sons George, 6, and Henry, 4, will get to have them once they're older.

Srabian's online efforts bring fans to the “front of the row” even though most of the time he's nowhere close to it. He works from his Sacramento home and makes the hour and a half drive to San Francisco twice a week. The set-up works perfectly because he gets to spend time with his children and wife Selena, who's due with their third child in October.

“A majority of what I do, I need to be online. In essence, being at the stadium is almost a distraction because you get caught up in the game. It's a dichotomy,” he says. “Whether fans are in town or away on vacation, if I can bring them as close as I can to the atmosphere, then I've done my job.”

“The tools may change, but the fundamentals remain the same. I have ideas and a voice when it comes to certain matters. That's the value of social media,” says Srabian.

content and they feel like they are part of the inside,” says Srabian. “The tools may change, but the fundamentals remain the same. I have ideas and a voice when it comes to certain matters. That's the value of social media.”

As a professional with a background in marketing, Srabian treats social media participation like customer service and asks himself simple questions in order to reach his audience, which collectively hovers around three million users across all platforms.

““Would I like this? Will this be of value to me? Will it be entertaining? Or is it just spam?” Essentially, fans are our market research. I am a Giants fan myself, so I can relate to them easier and empathize.” Aside from being the first to be informed and feeling a certain level of exclusivity, followers are also looking for freebies, slick deals, autographs, and

Another job title Srabian holds is professor. He teaches a master's course on social media at the University of San Francisco's sports management program. In the classroom, he's avoided textbooks altogether and instead teaches from the syllabus of “today.” What might work today might not tomorrow, so Srabian keeps the material fresh by analyzing social media's global power. That means studying new platforms, trends, overnight media darlings, and the channels of other successful franchises.

“It's not necessarily a lecture, but a conversation where everyone is involved by sharing ideologies,” he says. “People ask me questions, but I'll be the first one to say ‘I don't have all the answers.’ I try to learn as much as I can from who's doing what. We are looking at the new generation as to where social media is heading.”

In addition to the newly raised championship flag, the Giants added another attraction to their home



at AT&T Park for the 2013 season. They unveiled a social-media café under the majestic over-sized glove that sits beyond the centerfield wall. The area is designed for fans to battle the Bay's breeze with Peet's Coffee and use an interactive video board to Instagram photos, feel the social pulse of fellow fans by seeing what's trending, and send out live tweets. They can also use the area to charge their phones while catching the game on TV.

After nearly two years, Srabian's innovation has finally come to fruition. It's just part of the evolving culture at the ballpark, where mobile devices and emerging technology are replacing the mundane classics of a transistor radio and the daily paper previewing probable pitchers.

“It's really exciting to see an idea you thought was cool in the beginning, and have people buy into it internally,” admits Srabian. “I'm proud the Giants believed in me.

It turns into an environment that breathes innovation. There's a genuine satisfaction with that.”

The Giants are also one of about ten teams who use Apple Passbook technology to deliver single-game tickets, and are currently working on offering fans in-game seat upgrades. They also doubled AT&T Park's Wi-Fi network coverage from last year.

Contrast that to Srabian's first Opening Day with the team as an intern in 1995 when he did not have access to the Internet.

It is for such groundbreaking developments that the Giants are considered one of the most tech-forward franchises in all of sports. Just as the Oakland Athletics pioneered baseball with Moneyball's analytics and sabermetrics from across the Bay Bridge, the Giants are seemingly doing the same with technology.

Call it the Silicon Valley effect, or a #GlimpseIntoTheFuture. ■