

## Putting People First

An Interview with John Shea, Chief Executive Officer, Octagon Sports & Entertainment Network

**EDITORS' NOTE** John Shea leads the day-to-day responsibilities and strategic management for Octagon Sports & Entertainment Network's collection of industry-leading sports and entertainment marketing, talent management, communications, influencer, and creative firms including Octagon, R&CPMK, Futures Sport + Entertainment, FRUKT, Milkmoney and No2ndPlace. An industry veteran with more than two decades of experience in sports marketing, sponsorship, and advertising, Shea manages a team of 1,000+ employees across the globe working to help the agency network clients navigate, grow, and stand out across the sports, entertainment, and media landscape. Since joining Octagon in 1994 as Global President, Marketing and Events, Shea has been responsible for oversight of Octagon's U.S. and international marketing practices and global marketing offices, including all partnerships, events, experiential marketing, strategy, content, technology, and creative offerings. In addition, he has led the agency's marketing relationships with sports leagues, teams, and properties worldwide, including the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, PGA, PGA, PGA, Premier League, UEFA, MLS, NWSL, FIFA, USOPC, and IOC. A graduate of St. John's University, Shea was named one of Sports Business Journal's "Forty Under 40" – as one of the best and the brightest of the rising generation in sports business – in 2008 and 2009.



John Shea

agency in sports, entertainment, and culture. The company was founded in 1983, initially starting as a talent representation and management agency representing some of the top athletes and entertainers across the world, from 22-time major tennis champion Steffi Graf to two-time NBA MVP Stephen Curry and 28-time Olympic medalist Michael Phelps, among thousands of others.

Over the past four decades, Octagon has evolved from one agency to a network of six encompassing R&CPMK, Milkmoney, Futures Sport

+ Entertainment, FRUKT and No2ndPlace, which collectively specialize in sports, entertainment and lifestyle marketing, and public relations for brands, athletes, and celebrities.

Our capabilities include brand consulting, marketing, communications, events, strategy, media rights consulting, and creative divisions, which develop integrated campaigns for some of the world's biggest brands and Fortune 500 companies, including Activision, Bank of America, BMW, Cisco, Mastercard, The Home Depot, Verizon, YouTube, and many more.

We have more than 50 offices around the world, and are continuing to expand our expertise and capabilities by pushing the boundaries of the industry with ground-breaking campaigns, experiential activations, influencer partnerships, brand communications and integrations, along with our unmatched talent management portfolio.

**How do you describe Octagon's culture and how critical is culture to the success of the agency?**

Octagon and the entire Octagon Sports & Entertainment Network have always prided ourselves on putting our people first. Building a sustainable, people-first culture is a priority in our daily work, and a major reason that we attract and retain such great talent across our organization. We value the health, well-being, and happiness of each and every one of our teammates, because good, healthy, happy employees are at the core of the industry-leading work we do for our clients.

Whether it is regular check-ins with colleagues across the company, highlighting extraordinary work and efforts by our teammates, providing mental health days to help our people recharge, or organizing staff viewing parties for major sports and entertainment events, Octagon, R&CPMK, and our network of agencies are committed to its employees and the culture that we collectively create.

**Will you provide an overview of Octagon's service offerings?**

The service offerings and capabilities of our agency network are expansive, and we excel in many areas from representing the biggest and brightest stars to planning, shooting, and creating ad campaigns for some of the largest brands in the world.

In addition to our industry-leading talent management division, Octagon and our wider network of agencies advise more than 30 Fortune 500 companies on their marketing efforts, including Cisco, Coca-Cola, Expedia, Hasbro, UPS, and more. Our core competencies include brand and influencer marketing, communications, experiential marketing, sponsorship valuation and negotiation,

**COMPANY BRIEF** Octagon ([octagon.com](http://octagon.com)) is a preeminent integrated marketing and talent management agency in global sports and entertainment. The agency creates distinctive marketing campaigns for some of the largest brands and Fortune 500 companies across the globe and represents more than 1,000 of the most prominent and influential athletes, talent, and properties in the world. With more than 800 employees worldwide, based in 50 offices, in 20 countries, Octagon is positioned in virtually all areas of sports and entertainment.

**Will you highlight the history and heritage of Octagon and how the firm has evolved?**

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content development, creative planning and production, digital strategy, event planning and management, wealth management, and more.

### **What do you see as the role of a sports and entertainment agency and how do you define the Octagon advantage?**

Athletes, Entertainers, Influencers. Film, TV, and Music Innovators. Brands and Properties. These are the creators and cultivators of culture. So, while we represent some of the biggest stars in sports and entertainment, and we partner with many of the largest creators in the world, our Octagon Sports & Entertainment Network team knows that we also are the stewards of culture. As such, we are always focused on being ahead of the curve, playing smart, and creating captivating and purpose-driven work.

Our advantage doesn't lie in one specific asset or our approach to one area of the business. It comes in many forms, including our exceptionally talented people, amazing clients, focus on collaboration, steadfast commitment to creativity, strong belief in community, and our resolve to always deliver the best. Additionally, we cultivate and incorporate the most up-to-date data and insights to help tap into the emotion and attachment fans and consumers have for their favorite sports, athletes, artists, entertainers, and media platforms. We are committed to providing only best-in-class work for our clients, and our team stops at nothing to ensure they always deliver.

### **How did Octagon adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the resilience of Octagon's workforce during this uncertain time?**

The global pandemic created significant challenges for every industry and business. Our business was no different. Fortunately, we tapped into the power of our people and relied on the expertise, resilience, and perseverance of our entire organization to overcome obstacles at every turn. As our clients faced mounting pressures to adapt their messages and execute quickly, our global team banded together to create innovative solutions and tactics to continue reaching audiences and make a substantive impact.

Whether it was a highly engaging live stream experience during the height of the pandemic, bringing professional tennis tournaments back

to the United States, safely staging red carpet events once again around the world, or helping fans safely return to arenas and stadiums, our team collaborated and delivered at every turn. I and our entire leadership team are incredibly proud of the hard work, creativity, innovation, and persistence that permeated through our global team to continue creating such incredible work.

### **What are your views on the future of work and how important is it for Octagon's team to be in the office for collaboration and creativity?**

We have long focused on our employees' well-being and the need for flexibility from the traditional 9-5, so we have been preparing for the “future of work” for a long time. Aside from the busy travel schedule and often times atypical work week, our company has also offered work-from-home days and flexible scheduling for employees for many years, so our team is well equipped for the new hybrid and even remote working environment.

While we continue to embrace the new age of work, Octagon has also always valued collaboration and the power of community. In keeping with this theme, we have introduced in-office “team weeks” for our employees to come together for a few days during one week each month to meet in their local office to connect, ideate, plan, create, and enjoy the power of the in-person experience.

### **How important is it for Octagon to build a diverse and inclusive workforce to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when addressing client needs?**

Diversity and inclusion are not just important, but imperative to our mission as an agency network and the way we operate. It is critical to building effective client teams, as many of our clients charge us with helping them reach a diverse audience, and it is crucial to creating a smart, agile, pliable team that challenges the status quo and leans into the inherent benefits of differing opinions, experiences, and perspectives.

We have embraced the need to find and develop diverse talent throughout our agency. In the past year alone, nearly 50 percent of our new hires have been diverse candidates. We are committed to continuing to find the best, most diverse, and inclusive talent to further expand our team and better serve our clients.

Additionally, we have launched and grown a number of internal and external programs to continue to enhance DE&I throughout everything we do as an organization, from our Multicultural Marketing and Communications division to our HBCU accelerator programs for students interested in careers in sports and entertainment to our Career Development, Advancement and Transition division to developing and launching the first-ever HBCU invitational golf tournament in collaboration with the PGA Tour and our clients at SAS.

### **What do you see as Octagon's responsibility to be engaged in the communities it serves?**

Community is a key component of our agency network, and as such we remain committed to engaging with each of the communities our team enters. Whether it be in the market of one of our 50 offices, or through annual events we manage around the world, our teams remain dedicated to bringing a positive impact to each country, city, or neighborhood we touch.

### **How do you define the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?**

Over the course of my 30-year career, I've learned that being a true leader involves a collection of many skills and traits. First and foremost is articulating clear goals for the organization and our people. Additionally, communicating progress on a regular basis is critical, so that all staff – at all levels – are aware of developments and can celebrate and learn from our collective achievements.

Being available and approachable, an active listener and problem solver, and surrounding yourself with great people are also imperative to cultivating a successful business.

My leadership style is collaborative at its core, and I always encourage all staff to work as a team to collectively create solutions, grow opportunities, and deliver first-class work for our clients. Leading by example is paramount. No job should ever be too big or too small for any leader, and I aim to instill that principle in each team member across our six agencies around the world.

### **What advice do you offer to young people interested in a career in the sports and entertainment industry?**

In business we are all selling ourselves, ideas, or specific products and services, so developing your own style and voice is important to finding success at any level. The earlier you realize and can achieve this in your career, the better.

Be bold. Be Brave. Be creative. Work hard and focus on learning as much as you can. Working in sports and entertainment can mean long hours, unusual schedules, and it's not always the most glamorous, but the people you meet, the things you are able to do, and the sense of accomplishment you receive when you see the end result is a feeling largely unmatched. If you are committed to working in the industry, remain patient, and trust that your persistence and hard work will pay off. ●