
The other side of the ball: An analysis of the need for public relations and crisis management in sports

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Abstract

Previous research on crisis management has failed to evaluate its impact and implementation in sports. This study examines three cases of crises in sports and their effects on the involved parties, as well as the implementation of knowledge on effective crisis management and public relations strategies. The results of this study support the hypothesis that there is not an effective understanding of the basic crisis management strategies and that impinge the stakeholders in crises. Through the analyzation of three sports predicaments, future research can be lead in the direction of gaining data on the use of the precrisis phases of crisis communication.

Introduction

Sports are an American way of life. The Harris Poll shows that the National Football League (NFL) is overwhelmingly the favorite sport of Americans, directly followed by Major League Baseball (MLB) and then the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Schwartz & McGarry, 2014). Sports give Americans a reason to rally, rival and celebrate, and take thoughts away, even for a brief moment, of the mundane tasks of "the real world." Because of these statistics and facts, as well as the always changing technology of today, sports and their employees have a vast need for effective public relations. The relationship between the "fan-base" of sports and the players is a fragile one that is built on reputation, trust and public image combined with a personal connection with the fans.

There have been many players throughout history who have shattered this relationship due to choices of selfishness and haste versus thought and proactiveness. This brings in the need for proactive, effective public relations in the lifestyle of sports. As technology increases and integrates itself into our lives more and more there becomes a greater need for public relations in almost every aspect of life, but this is momentarily apparent in American sports and their participants.

Public relations, however, does not limit itself to just football or college football but to all professional sports as well. Looking specifically at three distinctly separate cases can help analyze and support the need for better knowledge and education of public relations and crisis management, as well as a designated team to take the crises facing athletes head on.

Cam Newton, Joe Paterno, and Tiger Woods all three had something very important in common: none grasped the effective way to manage a crisis. By looking at these separate cases three issues are prevalent 1) A blind eye was turned by at least one pawn in the scandal. 2) The main player did not correctly handle the situation, causing belief that there is not proper understanding of the importance of public relations and crisis management. 3) An abuse of

proper crisis management caused a change in perception of the athlete and the defamation of the reputation of said athlete.

Literature Review

Studies by Angela Pratt at Bradley University focus on the knowledge and recognition of public relations among the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Athletic Directors. Through in-depth interviews of twelve NCAA Division I Athletic Directors, Pratt used comparative-analysis procedures to evaluate the degree of understanding held. The findings show that the participants understand public relations as integrated impression management: a combination of image, message, and action/interaction. Specifically in their fields, athletic directors are the public relations practitioners or CEOs of their departments. This is proven through their power of finance, structures, management, procedures, and policies. These professionals are constantly on display for all of their publics and stakeholders and will receive the credit or blame for the success or failure of their athletic programs. Prompts were posed in the interviews to deliver open ended questions yet in no way provoke a specific response. Questions like "Tell me about you," and "What does public relations mean to you" were inquired of the Athletic Directors. As previously stated the findings were clear, the interviewed directors had a firm understanding of public relations as a whole identified in three areas: image, message, and action/interaction. These fundamentals of public relations also show the integrated understanding the Athletic Directors hold. Though none of these findings are generalizable they show the evolutions and trend increasing across the NCAA about public relations (Pratt, 2013).

An article in the Elsevier Public Relations Review, written and reviewed by Natalie Brown and Andrew Billings, discusses the effects of fans on social media in crises. The article, entitled "Sports Fans as Crisis Communicators on Social Media Websites," discusses the infractions of NCAA Division I teams in recruitment and scholarship. According to Brown and Billings on August 16, 2011, Yahoo! Sports accused Nevin Shapiro, an athletic booster from the University of Miami, of providing at least 72 scholarship athletes with impermissible benefits as defined by current National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) guidelines. Impermissible benefits are defined by the NCAA as any special arrangement given by an institution employee or institution affiliate to provide a student athlete with benefits not readily available to a regular student. Miami was then added to a growing list of Division I schools that were, at the time, being investigated by the NCAA for committing infractions, including Ohio State University, Auburn University, and University of Oregon. Yet, in a pre-Penn State/Syracuse sex abuse scandal era, none of the other allegations were as scandalous as the ones in Miami, which included thousands of dollars in impermissible benefits, illegal parties featuring prostitution and drug use, and the funding of at least one abortion.

The allegations against Miami were some of the most shocking since the 1980s in a case against Southern Methodist University for pay-for-play misconduct. This study analyzed how fans have utilized social networking, specifically Twitter, to implement Coombs's strategies to crisis management, becoming an arm of a university's crisis response team. Brown and Billings also address the communication strategies employed by fans of the Miami Hurricanes following potential NCAA violations levied against their football and basketball program. A content analysis of fan Twitter postings will identify the extent in which fans employ the reputation repair strategies outlined by Coombs (Coombs, 2012). Consequently, showing how the growing use and impact of social media among sports fans has led to the inclusion of a school's fan base as an outlet for crisis communication response. Overall, the results show that the Miami fans sought to use traditional reputation repair strategies in their Twitter accounts, all the while,

allowing the frequency of tweets to change dramatically over the course of time. New forms of repair strategies were uncovered throughout the research and Coombs's list of reputation repair strategies was generally found to fit the new era of fan-based social media. This aids in the fact that Twitter gives identified fans a medium to express the connection they feel with their chosen team and allows them to defend their team when a crisis arises.

According to the research and results through these strategies, fans can, indeed, become an effective arm of the university's crisis response. Since fans are willing to engage in traditional reputation repair strategies, universities and athletic organizations can allow them to aid their cause, while maintaining some distance from them in the event of any negative backlash. This is highly important to this analysis because it shows that social media is a major factor in the spread of information. This should not be taken lightly by anyone in the public relations or crisis management fields because this can be used as a huge benefit and positive addition to the organization. The idea that fans can be an extension and an arm of the crisis management team can be a scary or an impressive one. As a practitioner having something that fragile added to the pile of responsibility can be a burden or benefit as can your presence on social media (Brown & Billings, 2013).

W. Timothy Coombs's book *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding* gives much insight into the proper and effective ways to be a crisis manager. Crisis management is a challenge that every organization can and will face; however it is how they face it that makes the organization. When crisis management fails, the stakeholders and organization suffer. This is why all organizations must become prepared for crises. When communication is ineffective so is the crisis management and Coombs seeks to minimize the ineffectiveness. Through his plea for the proactive approach he shows that there are easy steps to follow to make it out on the positive side of the crisis. By breaking down a three part structure (precrisis, crisis event, postcrisis) he simplifies the steps to doing what needs to be done. This book is a great resource in aiding to the thesis of public relations and crisis management being a necessary part of sports. By showing that no one is exempt from crises; Coombs gives way to a new era of crisis communication (Coombs, 2012).

Discussion

In a southern way of life there is nothing greater than Southeastern Conference (SEC) Football. From September to December of each year life on weekends comes to a screeching halt. This is even more apparent in the state of Alabama, especially on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. The list of infamous football coaches and players from the University of Alabama and Auburn University includes Paul "Bear" Bryant, Joe Namath, Jay Barker, Nick Saban, Mark Ingram, A.J. McCarron, Pat Dye, Bo Jackson, Gus Malzahn, Tre Mason, and Cam Newton.

Cam Newton is a perfect example of why proactive public relations and crisis management are necessary in college football. According to multiple stories on the former Auburn University player, the NCAA notified Auburn of its investigation on Oct. 5, 2009, and requested documents including texts, emails and bank records for Cam Newton and his parents, including, Cam's father, Cecil Newton's suburban Atlanta church from Dec. 1, 2008 to Sept. 1, 2010. The NCAA also sought texts and cell phone records for former Auburn coach Gene Chizik and assistants Curtis Luper and Gus Malzahn, Newton's primary recruiters from the same time period. This investigation was necessary because of rumors alleging that the Newton's sought pay-for-play for the 21 year old football star. The documents showed Cecil Newton and former Mississippi State player and current booster, Kenny Rogers, sought \$120,000 to \$180,000 for the quarterback to sign with the Bulldogs out of junior college. They also exchanged some 275 calls or text messages between March 2009 and January 2010, with "the vast majority of these related

to MSU's recruitment of Newton." Only about 15 came after Newton signed with Auburn on Dec. 31, 2009 ("Auburn releases cam," 2011).

The NCAA investigated Newton's recruitment; the Newton's denied any wrongdoing, which allowed the star to remain eligible to play. Over the span of two days, the NCAA notified Auburn of violations of amateurism rules, the school declared Newton ineligible, and then the NCAA reinstated him, clearing Newton to compete without conditions ("More to the," 2011). According to Fox Sports, Kevin Lennon, NCAA Vice President of Academic and Membership Affairs, stated during the process "Based on the information available to the reinstatement staff at this time, we do not have sufficient evidence that Cam Newton or anyone from Auburn was aware of this activity, which led to his reinstatement ("Report: Cam Newton,")." With uproar occurring, it was not until December 2 that NCAA President Mark Emmert responded on the NCAA website: "We recognize that many people are outraged at the notion that a parent or anyone else could 'shop around' a student-athlete and there would possibly not be repercussions on the student-athlete's eligibility." The NCAA ruled that the Heisman favorite was unaware of the pay-for-play scheme concocted by his father and Rogers. The NCAA then declared Newton eligible to play for second-ranked Auburn ("More to the," 2011).

Though with quite rapid speed the case was opened and closed, it is still not in a major sense altogether closed. Speculation was and is still a major part of this case because there is no way to one hundred percent guarantee that Newton had no foreknowledge of the pay-for-play deals. According to interviews by Auburn University students, players, and athletic trainers Newton was almost quarantined, not being allowed to speak to many others at practice or classes, during and for a long period of time after the investigation. Just like research done by Brown and Billings, Twitter was a place for American football fans to turn and join the crisis communication team; however this seemed to hurt Auburn University and the star more than help. Through speculation and the power of social media the general consensus came to either praise the glorious man or call him "Scam" Newton.

At the time coach Gene Chizik was quoted as saying "I have 120 young men on this football team. Sometimes as their coach, as their mentor, as their father figure, I've got a responsibility to our young guys to defend and protect them. Certainly we ask them to do all the things right here on and off the football field at Auburn. ... Cameron Newton is one of the young men on our football team who has not only excelled as a tremendous athlete, he has done everything we asked him to do since he stepped on campus at Auburn ("Report: Cam Newton," 2010)." It would seem that a man and school that appear to take so much pride in its players and recruits would take the time to know their back story, history, and the drama that would follow them. Predicting the future is near impossible; however, being preemptive, proactive, and prepared for the unexpected is what it takes to be an effective public relations practitioner and crisis manager. Once again pointing back to Coombs's strategies and steps a lot takes place in the precrisis phase and Auburn University failed at this step, proving that it would be in most universities' and sports professionals' best interest to have a key crisis manager and public relations employee on staff and call at all times.

These incidents are not just isolated to the SEC or the south. A career stamped with distinction, glorious accomplishments, and immeasurable contributions to Pennsylvania State University was Joe Paterno's legend, legacy, and memory. However a foul red mark was placed across this beautiful 40 plus year career and lifestyle that was Joe Paterno. A program established under Paterno and his assistant coach Jerry Sandusky in 1977 called "The Second Mile" would be the downfall of the legend.

In the 1990s one participant of the program returned home with wet hair after an outing with Sandusky and told his mother that he had showered and been hugged in the shower by Sandusky. The boy's mother then reported this to the police and investigators were brought in. Sandusky confirmed that he had taken a shower with the boy and indeed hugged him during but promised never to do it again. The charges and investigation were then dropped and not spoken of again (Chappell, 2012).

Rumors began to spread again in the early 2000s as to Sandusky's inappropriate behavior with the young boys who attended The Second Mile program. Janitorial staff reported to management having seen Sandusky's car at odd hours and the man himself engaging in sexual activity with boys; however, all that was said was the men could write a report if they chose to do so. These men resulted in keeping quiet due to fear of losing their job. Two years later a graduate assistant reported to the Athletic Director, Tim Curley, and then to head coach, Paterno having seen Sandusky sexually assaulting a boy, of about 10 years of age, in the showers the previous night. Ten days later the graduate assistant met with Curley and another assistant coach to speak about what was seen, yet no report was made to police or the child protection agency. Two weeks after the meeting, nearly one month after the reported incident, Curley asked Sandusky to hand in his keys and banned him from bringing children to the campus, a decision approved by the university president (Keteyian, 2012). Seven years later the mother of the identified first identified victim in the case reported to the school system that her son had been sexually assaulted by Sandusky, and finally the police were called. Investigations then began resulting the firing of Paterno, the university president, and multiple other coaches and officials. After two years of investigations and trials Jerry Sandusky was found guilty of 45 of 48 counts of sexual abuse (Chappell, 2012).

Judging by the size of this investigation, number of players in it, and amount of cover up involved this is the sports crisis management conundrum of the decade. It is the right and responsibility of coaches and men and women who place themselves in a place of authority of children to protect them and this was not the case. Each of the men in this case, including Paterno, turned a blind eye to the damage being done not only to the children but the university's reputation as well as Paterno's own. If the program had the slightest understanding of public relations and crisis communication action would have been taken. One of the most important reasons for crisis management is to protect reputation and reduce harm to the organization and that was not the thought process here. Had any of the authority figures in this case stepped up and brought light to the situation the reputation and legend of the school, football program, and Joe Paterno could have been protected; however, none did, and a hand was forced to take everyone down with Sandusky.

Crisis communication and public relations encourages honesty and responsibility to stakeholders, yet the staff of Penn State did neither of these. This case once again proves the vast need for the knowledge and practice of public relations and crisis communication in sports.

Football is not the only sport subject to failures in crisis communication and public relations; it is also not only big teams with large numbers that give fail in their duties to stakeholders. Tiger Woods was on top of the world being named as one of the greatest golfers of all time as well as an American success story. Since 1999, not a year had gone by without him winning at least one Major golf championship, and he won 14 Majors from 1997 to 2008. In April 2009, he was photographed in the Oval Office meeting President Obama. On Oct. 1, Forbes named him the first athlete to earn \$1 billion (Callahan, 2013).

Though he appeared to be family man with a stable and amazing career, Woods was not the picture of perfection. On November 24, 2009 *The Enquirer* broke a story of an alleged mistress

of Woods. Woods allowed his wife to speak to the alleged mistress, Rachel Uchitel, who denied the affair along with Woods himself. On November 26, Thanksgiving night, Woods was restless and took sleeping medication to counteract the restlessness. While sleeping, Woods's wife, Elin Nordegren, went through his phone finding text messages and phone calls proving the affair. Waking Woods up, a fight ensued, causing the groggy golf player to rush outside into his vehicle to get away from his crazed wife who was ironically chasing him with a golf club. After backing out of the driveway and running over hedges and a mailbox, Woods then crashed into a neighbor's tree. Nordegren had been chasing him on the golf cart, and smashed out the back window of the 2009 Escalade. Woods was rushed to the hospital and released the next day, taken home by his wife who claimed it was a car crash and she had no idea what happened. It was not until two weeks later that Woods, on December 11, released a statement per his website stating "I am sorry for my infidelity and hurt...I will be taking an indefinite hiatus from professional golf ("Brief history of,")"

Woods committed the ultimate "sin" of crisis management and public relations by doing nothing. According to Coombs, as well as numerous other public relations scholars, it is imperative that an organization gives quick and immediate responses in the midst of crises. By saying nothing and giving no response more damage ensues with every passing minute. Woods's notion was to lay low and slide under the radar until the dust was settled, yet by doing that he created more turmoil and lost more credibility. By the end of the year, Woods had lost major endorsements from Gatorade, Gillette and Accenture which caused a loss of over \$50 million dollars to himself and his foundations. For three months the only spoken words heard from Woods were the ones on the voicemail he sent to Uchitel on the night of the incident, played over and over across the country. He spoke only through statements released on his website; no one saw him or even knew where he was. He and his management team were blasted for the way he was kept hidden while damage and rumors filled the voids.

However, his team is not convinced the situation was mishandled. One of his managers was quoted as saying, "First of all, I don't think anyone has ever experienced this. There certainly was not a road map how to deal with this. We consulted with some people who deal with crisis management, and that was the consensus we got (Ferguson)." Clearly this is not the case if public relations practitioners and crisis managers across the country were saying how wrong he and his team were, how can one be consulted and advised with the complete opposite view of what every text book and manual on the subject implies. Woods never has recovered fully from the yearlong mishap and though still a great golf player, he went down in history as nothing more than a "serial cheater" and a "coward" for not facing those who supported him along the way. This incident proves to be yet another example of how crisis management and public relations is prevalent and imperative to the practice of sports.

Conclusion

No organization is exempt from crises, especially when the organization is one with as much risk, success, failure, money, and stakeholders as the world of sports. Judging by the research done through Bradley University coaches know the ropes and basics of public relations but that cannot be generalized to every college and professional athlete. W. Timothy Coombs lays out crisis communication very well in the efforts to impart the necessary wisdom onto those who need it, and as shown public relations and crises touch every aspect of the American way of life. Each of the aforementioned cases gives a glimpse into the fact of crises being even more rampant in sports and figureheads of our hobbies and pastimes, yet there is still no attention and importance given to the precrisis phase until it is too late and damage has set in.

Is there a solution to this epidemic? Crises are inevitable so why are there not strategies taken to counteract and minimize the damage done to our role model athletes. There needs to be an implemented crisis communication team or manager for each sports team with preemptive plans of action to ensure protection of reputations and jobs. In Wood's case had an effective crisis manager been hired the results would have been completely different, and though yes still labeled as a cheater, Woods could have minimized the damage to his reputation. Instead he will continue to suffer being through his golf game and by no longer being someone to look up to.

In the Penn State scandal there were many moments for each figure involved to turn and do the right thing. Had a crisis manager been called or sought after for advice the situation would have ended differently; however that would require one of the figures in this incident to have stepped up before the hand was forced upon them, and that did not happen. The legacy of Pennsylvania State University, Joe Paterno, and the great football program could have been salvaged and minimally effected but when proper knowledge and education of public and crisis relations is not implemented negative outcomes are almost guaranteed.

Cam Newton shows a different side of the argument. Though his reputation is not exactly ruined, he is still not the perfect and spotless role model anyone outside of Auburn University looks to. The Auburn University staff takes time to invest in their recruits and their lives so it is possible they did know about the hot water Newton had been in and was continuing to simmer in; however, with the ruling of innocent Newton's name was still smeared. Had a crisis manager been consulted prior to or even in the midst of the turmoil Auburn University could have cooperated more smoothly with media and minimized harm and speculation to the football star. However, though he is now a success story to many he will continue to be known as "Scam" Newton.

These cases, as well as many others, show how effective public relations and crisis management can somehow glimmer through all the muck. What the future holds for sports and athletes is quite unknown but circumstances have greater chances of ending differently and more positively if this subject is taken more seriously.

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