

Module 1. The Foundation of Sports Public Relations



Imagine the following scenario:

Michael Stenerud works as the Public Relations Director for one of the top professional football teams in Europe. Michael tries to take a proactive approach to public relations by identifying potential public relations risks and having a plan in place for how the organization should respond. Michael also tries to educate other team executives and coaches on public relations issues, but has had little success in these areas. Michael would like to figure out how the organization can do better at educating coaches in particular. Michael is meeting with his staff, Josina Nunez, the Assistant Public Relations Director, and Susanna McCarthy, the team's Media Relations Director.

As the meeting begins, Michael starts by reviewing the organization's public relations plan that he developed last year, shortly after he was hired. Michael tells his staff that in a meeting with coaches, the coaches felt that public relations was *overblown*, and was something they did not have time to deal with, as their job was to make sure the team won games.

Michael asks his staff for their ideas on ways they can help coaches understand the need to be concerned about public relations and to take a more vested interest in this area. Susanna suggests that coaches could be shown examples of players who have caused public relations issues for teams, due to their media comments and social media posts. Susanna mentions that perhaps the coaches should get some public relations training as part of their media relations training. Josina then mentions several public relations cases where coaches have ignored actions of players, that have later become international news stories, which in some cases, have resulted in the coaches losing their job.

As they continue to discuss the issue, Michael's phone vibrates and he picks up to see he has a message from a local media member asking for comment about an article they are preparing to run. When Michael asks for details, he is informed that a sexual assault report has just been made towards one of the team's players. The reporter also informs Michael that he has reached out to one of the coaches, and has a comment from the coach who has attributed the assault charge to the *groupie culture* and the coach believes the player should not be disciplined.

Michael tells the reporter he will provide comment later, and as he hangs up, Josina notifies him that she is seeing comments starting to populate on the team's Facebook and Twitter accounts, asking what the organization's response to the sexual assault charge will be.

Michael, Josina, and Susanna decide to continue their conversation later, but agree that this incident illustrates exactly why coaches and other team employees need to be concerned with public relations.

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Unit 1.1. Sports Public Relations Fundamentals

Public relations is an essential part of any organization, as organizations need to create and maintain a positive perception with multiple audiences such as the public, government, sponsors, and the media. However, due to the action of its employees, organizations experience damage to their reputation and in those situations, they must engage in public relations to mitigate the damage to the organization's reputation and try and restore the previous reputation they enjoyed.

Additionally, public relations messaging has undergone significant changes in the past decade, as the Internet and social media have proliferated across society. Organizations now have the capabilities to engage in public relations more proactively and can tailor their message to multiple audiences across different social media networks. However, social media has also enabled the audience to be more active, and audiences can now challenge public relations narratives introduced by organizations.

Public relations have been a vital part of sports organizational management, as sport organizations depend on trustworthy relationships with their fans, the public, government, and the media. Given the competitive nature of sports, sports organizations that do not experience competitive success must find ways to minimize the effect that losing has on the organization's reputation, and to appease frustrated fans. Additionally, athletes, coaches, and some team employees maintain high public profiles, and their actions can easily trigger public relations issues for the organization. Sports organizations have also seen public relations issues arise from social media, as athletes, coaches and team employees have power to share comments from virtually any location, and it is more difficult for sports organizations to control messages as they did in the era of traditional media. Given the importance of public relations and organizational reputation, it is crucial that sports organization managers develop a public relations plan that helps the organization identify potential threats and plan responses to these threats. There is no way to prevent every potential public relations issue, but, organizations that are proactive in planning are better prepared to handle situations that arise and have a strong foundation in place to effectively mitigate the risk to the organization's reputation.

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1.1.1 Elements of Sports Public Relations

Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2006) define sports public relations as “a managerial communication-based function designed to identify a sport organization’s key publics, evaluate its relationships with those publics, and foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those publics” (p. 2).

One of the key elements in public relations is to define the publics that the organization has a vested interest in, or groups that the organization is trying to reach, or those who can affect the organization. For example, an intercollegiate athletics program in the United States might identify its publics as: (1) Current student-athletes; (2) prospective student-athletes; (3) students on campus; (4) faculty on campus; (5) alumnae; (6) local media organizations and reporters; (7) national media organizations and reporters; (8) internal employees; and (9) corporate sponsors, both local and national. In this context, the athletics program would identify messaging best suited to reach each of those audiences and potential public relations risk with each of those groups. Additionally, while publics is a very broad term, it is important to remember that perceptions are unlikely to be unanimous in each of these groups, so organizations need to account for differences within them that may impact public relations issues. For example, if the athletic department wants to raise money by adding a student fee, they need to account for some students being opposed to this action, and design different campaigns to reach those students as opposed to how they would message students who would be supportive of this measure.

Once sports organizations have identified their publics, they need to assess their relationships with each of these publics. What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses? How might a public who has a strong relationship with the sports organization be used to help improve a weaker relationship with a different public? In assessing their relationships with publics, it is important that organizations are open to the potential that some relationships may need improvement, and it may help to solicit multiple viewpoints to establish this perspective. It will not be helpful if an organization has a biased and skewed view of their relationships with publics and that is likely to result in ineffective public relations practices.

To help you better understand your own's organization's publics, complete the following tool to identify your organization's publics:

Table 1. Identifying Public

Identifying Publics		
Public Name	Description	Relationship Quality

Source: prepared by author.

After a sports organization has evaluated its relationship with its publics, it then needs to determine what platforms are the best way to reach those publics. Returning to our earlier example, the intercollegiate athletics department may determine that the best way to reach alumnae is through the alumnae magazine and e-mail, and that the best way to reach current students is through Instagram and Snapchat. Given the contemporary media environment, it is important for sports organizations to understand that a variety of media must be used to reach their publics. Certainly, some sports organizations have more resources than others, so how much media an organization can use will vary, but understanding the media preferences of publics will help ensure organizations are using the right platform to engage in public relations.

Another important element of sports public relation is publicity. Whereas sports organizations have historically relied on the mass media for publicity, now many sports organizations have their own media channels that they can use to generate publicity as well. Thus, determining how the sports organization will seek publicity through both internal and external sources is an important aspect of planning sports public relations. Finally, it is important for sports organizations to identify risk, or potential crisis situations that could affect their relationships with each of the identified publics. As organizations evaluate these potential risks, they must also plan for messaging that can be used to reduce the damage to the organization's reputation with those publics.

Certainly, managers in sports organizations cannot plan for every possible public relations issue, but identifying these essential building blocks can help a sports organization better manage public relations and ensure that their messaging is meeting the needs and desires of the audience.

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1.1.2 Value of Sports Public Relations

Public relations are a valuable tool for sports organizations. There are two primary ways that public relations demonstrate value for sports organizations: (a) brand-building; and (b) preventing incidents that can damage the organization's reputation (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2006). With respect to brand-building, public relations adds value by promoting the positive things that the organization is doing via both traditional and internal media channels. For example, a sports organization can promote their community relations efforts which helps build goodwill with the public. That goodwill can be banked and be useful in future situations (e. g., the organization asking for public funding for a new stadium). Additionally, public relations can work in concert with the marketing and promotions departments to generate revenue. If a sports organization is running a ticket promotion, the public relations department can design messages to reach each of the organization's publics and encourage them to participate in this promotion. Public relations also add value by telling stories that reflect positively on the organization and help enhance its reputation with the organization's publics. Often, organizations try to sell first and build relationships second, but more effective results are achieved when this order is reversed. Sports public relations help build and strengthen relationship with publics, making them more receptive to asks as they have been primed to think positively about the organization.

Sports public relations also provide value by preventing potentially damaging issues. When sports organizations experience crisis, it can be costly both in terms of financial penalties (e.g., fines) as well as the loss in brand value and organizational reputation. Thus, sports public relations help organizations minimize risk by identifying potential risk areas and helping the organization avoid them. For example, a team executive may want to institute a ticket increase, following a season in which the team performed at a subpar level. The public relations professionals in the organization may help the team executive see that the fan base is already critical of the organization, and adding a price increase to tickets, would be likely to turn fans away even more. While sports public relations professionals can help to prevent incidents, it is impossible to entirely prevent them from occurring and in some cases, the organization may have to choose between which option offers the least public relations risk. For instance, if one of the team's athletes has spoken out on a political issue, this might upset the fan base and/or sponsors, and so the organization may look good with those publics by disciplining or condemning the athlete, yet if they do so, they are likely to incur public relations risk for being seen as infringing on freedom of speech. In such situations, sports organizations must tread carefully and assess where the least risk is, as there is likely to be pushback no matter what choice is made.

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1.1.3 Organizational Reputation

Reputation is an important construct for both, individuals and organizations. In many cases, it takes a good amount of time to build a reputation, but the reputation can be damaged very quickly. Thus, much hard work can be erased with one action. Whereas sports organizations do have a reputation, it is important to remember that, as a non-human entity, the organization’s reputation is comprised of the action of individuals. Thus, how athletes, coaches, team executives, and team employees act influences how publics view the organization’s reputation.

Although public relations professionals help sports organizations maintain their reputation, there are times where the reputation can be damaged. When an organization’s reputation is damaged, it can be repaired, and a variety of strategies can be called upon. The list below summarizes some of the most common image repair strategies:

Table: Repair Strategies	
Strategy	Definition
Denial	
Simple Denial	Did not perform act
Shifting Blame	Another performed act
Evade Responsibility	
Provocation	Responded to another’s act
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
Accident	Mishap
Good intentions	Meant well
Reducing Offensiveness	
Bolstering	Stress positive traits
Minimization	Act less harmful than believed
Differentiation	Act less harmful than similar acts
Transcendence	More important values (end justify means)
Attack Accuser	Reduce accuser’s credibility

Compensation	Reimburse victim
Corrective Action	Plan to repair/prevent recurrence
Mortification	Apologize, express remorse for acts.

Source: prepared by author, based on Benoit, 1995, 2006.



1.1.4 Managing Relationships

The organization's reputation is also determined by the quality of its relationships with each of its identified publics. Accordingly, it is important that organizations constantly assess their relationships with their publics and identify potential threats, as remaining static in this area can be damaging to the organization's reputation. Relationships are a two-way street and involve listening. At times, organizations tend to only *talk* and not listen to their publics. Organizations that take time to get feedback from their publics and then demonstrate how relevant feedback is being integrated into the it show publics that the organizations values its relationship with them, which strengthens the bond between these two entities. For example, if a sports organization is getting negative feedback from fans about their parking processes, the organization might study their parking strategy and evaluate the feedback they are receiving. To show value in the relationship with fans, the organization can post updates that keep fans apprised of their efforts, and if the organization decides to make changes, these can be announced to fans. If the organization decides not to make changes, it is equally important that this be communicated as well. Sports organizations value their publics, but the question is, how do they communicate that value to the publics? Saying a public is valuable is insufficient, the organization must show that it values the publics, and be prepared to encounter turbulence, and address issues that arise. In some cases, organizations feel that hiding from problems and not addressing them is the most optimal solution, and yet, this behavior if often perceived by publics as lacking transparency. The more honest and open sports organizations can be with their publics, the better their relationships will be.

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Unit 1.2. Sports Public Relations and Messaging

Sports public relations is a communicative task. It cannot be practiced without messaging. However, simply engaging in *messaging* is insufficient for effective public relations practices. For public relations to be optimal, sports public relations professionals need to determine what messaging works best for each of its publics and what platforms are best suited to deliver that messaging. Additionally, messages may need to be tailored to each public uniquely. For instance, a sports organization that is seeking public funding for a new stadium may need to design one message for citizens and fans, one for government officials, one for the media, and one for local businesses. Sports public relations professionals must also ensure that there is a commitment to public relations at an organizational level. Given that sports organizations often have high public visibility, the actions of employees, particularly athletes and coaches, can significantly impact the organization's reputation. Thus, it is helpful for sports organizations to provide training and instruction on public relations risks and how individual actions can impact the organization. This is particularly relevant, given how easy it is for individuals to disseminate information via social media and for that information to be quickly circulated before an organization is fully aware of what is happening. Public relations, like many aspects of an organization, can be effectively managed through planning, and sports organizations that plan public relations will have greater success in managing risks and reducing damage to the organization's reputation.

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1.2.1 Managing Internal Messaging

Internal messaging is a significant aspect of sports public relations. If the people responsible for the performance of the organization are not invested in its well-being, or committed to it, other publics will be affected. For example, if employees in ticketing are unhappy, their feelings are likely to translate over into the customer process, potentially driving away fans and potential fans. Sports public relations professionals therefore, need to assess how internal employees feel about the organization and construct messaging that meets those needs and addresses any issues. Returning to the earlier example, perhaps the public relations staff in that organization decides to meet with ticketing employees and finds out they are unhappy because of micro-management. The public relations staff reports this information to the Human Resources Department, who then meets with the ticketing management and works out a solution to provide less-intensive management, which resolves the concern among the ticketing employees. Sports organizations also benefit by identifying processes for internal employees to have a voice and communicate about issues. For example, a sports organization may hold regular meetings where employees can voice their feelings, or provide written platforms for employees to communicate (e-mails, intranet). Sports organization can derive a variety of solutions to help internal employees feel valued, the important thing is to make sure that the relationship is mutual, that employees feel that they are being *listened to*, and not just *talked to*.

In addition to managing the messaging directed to internal employees, sports public relations professional must also be mindful of the ability for internal employees to create public relations issues through their own personal communication. Historically, this concern has been linked to employees talking to the media, but in the era of social media, employees have a variety of outlets to share information, and often, given their association with a sports organization, many fans, the public, and media members are watching their social media profiles closely, looking for information about the organization. While there have been employees who have released information with malice, in many cases, employees do not intend to create a public relations issue, but may not fully understand the *public* nature of social media comments and how quickly this information can circulate. Sports public relations professional can help manage this process by providing training to employees that helps them understand the risks that can arise from their messaging and also identify employees who, due to their position and access to information, may be more at risk for public relations issues via their personal messaging.



1.2.2 Managing External Messaging

Sports organizations engage in significant external messaging. Through broadcasts, press releases, post-game interviews, Facebook posts, and Snapchat posts, sports organizations are continually engaging a variety of stakeholders. Just as it is important to understand messaging with internal employees, sports organizations also need to determine what messaging will work best for external audiences, to assess potential threats with these publics, and to identify deficits in relational quality. In crafting external messages, sports organizations need to be mindful of how these messages will be perceived. For example, if an organization is putting out a message about an increase in ticket prices, they may need to consider how this might impact fans with limited incomes, and perhaps provide some additional options for fans to take advantage of discounts, or certain seating that is in a more affordable price range.

Sports organizations also need to be mindful that the message they put out is likely to be in competition with other content, particularly from media outlets. Thus, sports organizations need to determine how their message diverges from those disseminated by other entities, and perhaps will need to provide clarification. Of course, some times, there may be little that a sports organization can do to counter a narrative. For instance, if a sports organization has had a subpar season, and a local media member is criticizing the team for its performance, trying to counter that specific message is likely to prove ineffective – the record is what it is – and in these cases, rather than trying to argue, or put a spin on a losing record, the sports organization is better off focusing on stories related to positive things the organization is doing in the community, or steps they are taking to improve the team for the following season.

External messaging is also significantly influenced by social media, as audiences can take control of the organization's narrative and shift it in unintended directions that reflect unfavorably on the organization. For instance, there have been several organizations that have disseminated hashtags to encourage positive public relations with the organization. However, one trend that has occurred is *hashtag hijacking* wherein audiences use the hashtag to introduce critical narratives of the organization. Certainly, the intent of these efforts is genuine, organizations are authentically seeking to interact with the public. However, sports organizations need to be particularly mindful of how their external messaging is going to be perceived and assess the potential for the messaging to be used by audiences in ways that affect the organization negatively. To be sure, it may not be possible to forecast every potential situation, but understanding the active audience, and their ability to take over messages, is something that sports public relations professionals need to consider in planning their external messaging.

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1.2.3 Media and Social Media Training

Given the potential for issues with internal and external messaging, it is very beneficial for sports organizations to provide media and social media training to its employees, and many sports organizations already engage in this practice. Providing training is a commitment, and does require resource investment (e.g., creating training materials, bringing in an outside speaker).

However, the investment does provide return in the following ways:

Creating Awareness

Some employees may be unaware of the ways in which their comments and messaging can create public relations risk for sports organizations. For example, some media members may be known to *bait* athletes into saying something controversial, and some athletes may be too trusting of the media. Thus, helping athletes understand the types of questions that can lead to controversial comments, as well as providing guidance about how to answer certain questions can help avoid risk. Additionally, some employees may be unaware of their reach, in that as they work for a sports organization, people in the public, including media members, may be following their social media accounts, looking for information about the organization. In these cases, helping employees understand their reach and potential impact a seemingly innocuous message can have on the organization can help reduce risk.

Strengthens Relationships

In providing training, the organization is showing that it values the relationship it has with its employees. Thus, it is important that training be done in an educational, rather than a *lecturing* manner. Media and social media training should be communicated in such a way that employees understand that it is a resource, and that the organization wants to help protect them, as well as the organization. In that respect, stressing the collective nature of the organization, and showing how one person's actions can affect the entire organization, can help achieve buy-in. As the lesson has discussed, communication is essential in building and developing relationships, and sports

organizations that position media and social media training as a resource and a tool for employees, will see greater buy-in than if the training is presented in a condescending manner, or as something being done to *check a box*.

Risk Prevention

Providing media and social media training helps cultivate awareness, and therefore, can reduce risk. Training and education provide information for employees, and information and data help to reduce uncertainty. This does not mean that training is an absolute guarantee against public relations issues being created – it is not. However, what it does do is provide understanding and reduces the potential for risk, because employees are aware of issues, how issues can be created, and how the organization is helping them to not communicate something that will lead to an issue.

There are several considerations (e.g., content to be covered, format of training, frequency of training, who will give training) that sports organizations will need to determine when designing media and social media training, and these decisions will often be dictated by resources. For instance, a professional basketball team may be able to pay a public firm to come *in-house* and provide this training, while a minor-league hockey team may have its media relations personnel conduct the training. Sports organizations also need to implement feedback into their training processes. This helps the organization understand what employees found useful and what can be improved on for the next session. Getting feedback also helps with relationship building, as employees perceive that they have a voice, and are not just being lectured to. Finally, given how quickly media and social media are evolving, sports organizations need to ensure that their training is current with contemporary trends. For instance, some research has found that sports organizations still include language in their social media policies about Myspace and Friendster, even though these social media platforms are of little relevance to athletes (Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, & Gramlich, 2015).

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1.2.4 Developing and Evaluating Public Relations Plans

To successfully manage public relations, sports organizations need to develop a plan for public relations. Having a written plan in place helps a sports organization design their internal and external messaging based on identified needs of their publics, to identify potential risks, and provide guidance on how to respond to threats. Plans also help sports organizations benchmark their public relations and to adjust as needed. It is very difficult to assess performance, if there is nothing against which to evaluate results.

Coyle (2014) identified the following steps to creating a public relations plan:

Step 1

Understand your current scenario. Here, sports organizations need to assess where they are currently at with respect to their industry. What is the sports organization doing a good job of communicating about itself? What could be improved? Establishing a baseline helps with the next step – goal development.

Step 2

Establish your goals. What is the organization trying to achieve with its public relations? Are there measurable outcomes (e.g., increased ticket sales, more positive publicity?). Coyle (2014) recommends developing between 3-5 goals and he states that it is also important to make sure that goals are measurable.

Step 3

Define your audiences. Here, sports organizations need to determine who the organization is trying to reach (their publics) and the quality of that relationship. Also, it is important here to remember that audiences will want/need messages differently and audience definition should be something that has organizational agreement.

Step 4

Choose tactics and channels. As each audience has different needs, what are the best types of messages to reach each of them? What platforms are best to reach them? Here, the organization can rely on their past research and demographic trends. For instance, if a sports organization is trying to reach season-ticket holders, and past data indicates e-mail as a successful mechanism to reach that audience, e-mail messaging should be used. Additionally, the organization might also know that their season-ticket demographic is comprised of individuals who are of an older age, and if so, they may consider using Facebook to reach that demographic as well.

Step 5

Determine measurement and reporting. This step flows from determining tactics and channels. How will success be measured on Facebook as compared to e-mail? What particular measurements of success is the organization looking for? How will those results be reported within the organization?

Step 6

Prepare an itemized budget for each year of the plan. While sports organizations have varying amounts of resources, it is important to plan the budget that will be needed to institute the plan. Preparing a budget helps communicate thought and foresight with how public relations will be implemented and provides a scope for resources that are needed to execute the plan.

Public relations plans also require evaluation. Determining measure and reporting are helpful steps to evaluate public relations plans. Sports organizations also need to determine timeframes for success, and should be cautious about making decisions on short-term results. In addition to the metrics that can be used to evaluate performance, sports organizations can also rely on feedback. Publics can provide feedback through a variety of platforms (e.g., social media, e-mails) and sports organizations can use this data to determine how their public relations efforts are being perceived and make course corrections as needed.

Planning lays the groundwork for execution and is an important part of organizational management beyond public relations. Organizations that have a written plan for public relations and that are consistently evaluating that plan and making changes as needed will see their public relations efforts maximized, risk reduced, and relationships strengthened.

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