

## Module 2. The Changing Landscape of Sports Public Relations

**Imagine the following scenario:**

Guillermo Diaz has just taken over the position as Public Relations Director for a professional women's soccer franchise in the United States. During the interview process, Guillermo was shocked by how inactive the organization seemed to be in telling its story to the public. Guillermo observed that the organization relied on mainstream media coverage to promote the team, and that coverage of the team was very minimal.

Guillermo begins his first day on the job by meeting with his staff - Lindsay Rollins, an intern who primarily helps with press releases, and Jeff Clarkson, the organization's media relations manager. During the meeting, Guillermo informs Lindsay and Jeff that he wants the organization to take a more active role in telling its story, particularly via the organization's website and dormant social media accounts. He also informs the staff that he wants to start telling more *human-interest* stories about the players, coaching staff, and fans via the organization's internal media.

Jeff responds by saying that the local media will not be favorable towards the organization generating its own media, and warns that the organization still needs the benefit of media coverage from local outlets, meager as it may be. Guillermo informs Jeff that he appreciates his concern, and that he does want to maintain a good relationship with the local media, but he also emphasizes that the organization needs to do more to tell its story.

Guillermo asks Lindsay to start taking a more active role in promoting the organization via social media, asking her to start by covering a community event with several of the players making an appearance at a local elementary school that day. Guillermo asks Lindsay to get video footage of the appearance and get some comments from students and staff at the school.

Lindsay excitedly agrees and expresses enthusiasm for this new direction, while Jeff reiterates his concerns about trying to compete with the media. As the meeting ends, Guillermo reflects on the challenge ahead of him and thinks about how he can encourage Jeff to see the value in this new approach. He knows Jeff is a seasoned professional, but Guillermo feels the media landscape is changing and believes the organization should be taking advantage by using its resources to tell its story.



## **Unit 2.1 Becoming Your Own PR Agency**

Sports public relations, like many industries, is undergoing a shift as a result of media infrastructure. Whereas sports organizations have told their stories through traditional media outlets such as magazines and newsletters, often, sports organizations have relied on mainstream media to generate publicity and attention around the organization (e.g., team personnel pitching stories to media members). Additionally, some sports organizations have often focused on public relations after a crisis has happened, rather than cultivating positive relationships consistently before a crisis. In the contemporary era of media convergence, and the insatiable demand for information from fans and other sports consumers, sports organizations are in a position where they must be active in practicing public relations. That is, sports public relations require an ongoing, proactive effort to tell the organization's story via multiple forms of media. Certainly, there is still a place for the organization's magazine or newsletters, but now stories must also be told via the organization's website and social media accounts.

Additionally, organizations no longer need to wait on the media to provide coverage or to help the organization with public relations efforts. Although the media is still a valued and necessary partner, there are stories the organization can now tell of its own accord, rather than pitching stories to media members. For example, the organization's community relations efforts can be captured and shared on the organization's website, with snippets teasing the content being disseminated via the organization's social media networks. Public relations staff can look for unique stories about athletes, coaches, team employees, and fans, and share those as well. In doing so, the organization cultivates goodwill that can be utilized when a public relations issue surfaces.

### **2.1.1 Effectively Strategizing Public Relations Content**

As discussed in the previous unit, sports organizations need a written public relations plan to guide their strategy. Thus, the content for public relations should come from this document. Via the plan, the organization identifies the different publics that the organization wants to reach. For example, a professional football organization may identify its publics as: (a) season-ticket holders; (b) fans in the local geographic area; (c) local and national media members; (d) community members in the geographic region; and (e) corporate sponsors. In strategizing public relations content for each of these groups, the organization needs to determine what kinds of content each audience will be most receptive to. For instance, the organization may determine that season-ticket holders are most interested in news about the team's performance, as well as human-interest stories about athletes and coaches. For fans in the local geographic area, they assess that these individuals are most interested in content about the team and how they



are working to enhance their competitiveness as well as being interested in initiatives that the organization is performing in the local area. For local and national media members, they identify news about the organization as being of most interest (e.g., player transactions). For community members in the geographic area, they identify community relations as the primary informational interest. Finally, for corporate sponsors, they determine that community relations efforts and sponsor integration in marketing and promotion are of most interest.

Once the organization has identified the types of information that each public is interested in, it must then determine the best platforms to provide that information. Continuing with the above example, the organization determines that the best way to reach season-ticket holders is through e-mail, the monthly season-ticket holder magazine, the organization's website and Facebook. For fans in the local area, they identify the organization's website, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as the best ways to reach that audience. For local and national media members, they believe press releases and Twitter are the best platforms to reach this group. For local community members, they identify the organization's website and Facebook as the best platforms to reach this audience, and for corporate sponsors, they determine e-mail and the organization's website are the best way to reach this audience. To help you identify the types of information your own organization's publics are interested in and the best channel to provide that information, complete the following table for your own organization:

**Table 1: Strategizing Public Relations Content**

Public Name	Information They Want	Channel(s) to Deliver that Information

Source: prepared by the author.

It is important to remember that other entities (e.g., the media) will be telling stories about the organization as well, so care should be given to how the organization is to be portrayed. For example, if the organization decides to fire a coach, the organization may use public relations to frame the firing as being an unfortunate, but necessary change to enhance competitiveness, whereas the media may frame the firing in much different terms. Sports organization cannot control other entities from putting out information, but what they can do, is introduce alternative narratives for public consumption.

### 2.1.2 Creating Public Relations Content

Once the method of delivery has been determined, those responsible for public relations need to assess the organization and identify sources



where this news can come from - or public relations content that needs to be created. Some public relations content happens organically. For example, sports organizations routinely conduct player transactions, may be experiencing competitive success, or land a key hire for its executive team. This kind of information happens without much effort on the part of public relations staff and can be easily disseminated to the sport's organizations publics. While such information may seem standard, or unimportant to those working in the organization every day, it is important to think outside the box, or to think like the audience (public) the organization is trying to reach. In doing so, the sports organization can take routine content and make it into a compelling public relations story. Returning to the previous example, for a sports organization that is experiencing sustained competitive success, the public relations staff could put together a short video with interview segments from players and coaches discussing what it takes to obtain that kind of success. Perhaps a strategic hashtag could be used to brand the success and this video could be shared on the organization's website and YouTube channel. With the hire of a key executive, the public relations staff could conduct a video interview with the executive and post it to the organization's website and share the link across its social media platforms. Taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary is a key challenge in creating effective public relations content.

In addition to the standard activities of a sports organization, public relations staff also need to look for stories that can be used as compelling public relations content. Certainly, this requires effort and the need to communicate the public relations plan across the organization. Perhaps there are people in other departments and functional areas of the organization who are aware of good stories, but who do not know how to suggest ideas. For example, an Account Executive may be aware that a season-ticket holder is doing philanthropic work in the community. The public relations staff could meet with the season ticket holder and develop a story profiling his/her efforts. Providing a mechanism for people to report idea is an important task for sports public relations staff to undertake. This could be as simple as an e-mail to all employees informing them of the public relations plan, or could involve an informal meeting once a month, where employees can show up and submit ideas. Beyond encouraging participation from other team employees, sports public relations staff can do their own investigation for stories that would make compelling public relations content. For example, perhaps one of the team's coaches is also working on pursuing a graduate degree, and is balancing schoolwork with coaching. Or, perhaps the team has a fan who has not missed a home game in 30 years. Telling these kinds of stories is a great way to perform public relations in a consistent, proactive manner, and this kind of content also helps the organization foster stronger emotional connections with its publics.



### **2.1.3 Distributing Public Relations Content**

Once public relations content has been created, it must be disseminated to the various publics the organization is targeting. As mentioned earlier, as part of the planning process, the organization needs to identify what channels will work best to communicate this information. It is important to remember that audiences will often go to where organizations direct them, if they provide audiences with that information. For instance, a sports organization can put extremely compelling content on its website, but if they don't announce that the content is there, the number of people who see it is greatly reduced and limited to those who might habitually check the organization's website. However, if the sports organization posts links to the story on its Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, the visibility increases as does the likelihood of more people going to the website to read the story. As mentioned earlier in the lesson, different publics have different preferences for how they receive information, and sports organization often have diverse publics they are trying to reach and must account for that in distributing public relations content. For example, the organization's season ticket holders may be in an older demographic and so content is best distributed to them via a monthly season ticket holder magazine and the organization's Facebook page. However, the organization may also have a younger demographic of fans and thus, the best platforms to reach that audience may be Instagram and Snapchat. It will be difficult for sports organizations to effectively engage in public relations if they are not delivering content to the places their publics go to access information.

Sports organizations also have varying levels of resources, and thus, some sports organizations may not have the staffing and/or financial resources to disseminate content across multiple communication channels. In these situations, public relations staff need to identify the best platforms then to reach the widest audience. For example, a minor league baseball team may determine that the team's website and Facebook are the most effective resources to reach their audiences. Nevertheless, audience preferences can and do change, so it is important for sports public relations staff to be aware of emerging trends and changing audience preferences.

### **2.1.4 Integrating Relational Partners**

Sports public relations also benefit when relational partners are integrated. For example, a sports organization may be seeking ways to feature their corporate sponsors more in their public messaging. One potential solution that sports organization could implement is having the entity sponsor a giveaway or segment on one of the organization's social media platforms. For instance, if the fictitious corporate sponsor was named Acme, the organization might have a Twitter post prior to each entitled #AcmePerformanceKeys that is used to discuss keys to the upcoming game. The sports organization could then use analytics to help show the sponsor reach and engagement as indicators of return



on investment. As another example, the sports organization might work with the sponsor on a community relations initiative, and through the organization's telling of the story, the corporate sponsor is featured. Whereas there are creative ways to engage corporate partners in public messaging, the sports organization must be mindful of audience reaction, particularly if the audience feels they are being sent overt marketing and sales messages. It can be a delicate balance to promote a corporate sponsor without alienating fans, but paying attention to audience perceptions and adjusting as necessary is more conducive than continuing to put out messaging that upsets some of the organization's audiences.

In addition to corporate sponsors, sports organizations can also identify other relational partners such as vendors, local and national government, and charitable organizations that can be featured in public relations content. For example, a sports organization might learn that its IT vendor received recognition for being one of the best places to work, and the sports organization could find a way to feature this announcement in their public relations content by discussing how the organization benefits from the employees of the IT vendors, perhaps featuring several of those employees in the story as well. Additionally, the sports organization might have a partnership with a non-profit group that provides school supplies for needy children, and the sports organization could feature the work of this organization, along with discussing its partnership in their public relations content. Certainly, looking for these kinds of stories can be time consuming, but they do exist, and taking the effort to look for them and tell them to the organization's publics, strengthens the business relationship and builds goodwill with these entities as well as the organization's other publics.



## **Unit 2.2 Managing Sports Public Relations**

Sports public relations require a written plan that informs and shapes strategy execution. However, it is important to remember that public relations are not static. Sports organizations have to adjust their public relations based on, among other things, news events, audience feedback, shifts in organizational philosophy, and industry trends. Thus, managing sports public relations can be an arduous task, but a necessary one if the organization is to truly benefit from public relations. For example, a sports organization may feel that they have conceived a well thought-out public relations campaign with a hashtag they think will engage the audience. Yet, when the campaign is executed, they find that audiences reacted very negatively to the campaign and re-appropriated the hashtag to mean something else (or what is referred to as hashtag hijacking). While this is not the desired result, the organization can step back and learn from the campaign, assess what went wrong and put out a more effective campaign the next time. Additionally, as sports organizations move into a more active role in storytelling, this may lead to conflict with media members who feel that they are losing access to information that they have traditionally reported. Although it may not be possible to smooth feelings here entirely, it is still important to find productive ways to work with media members and manage conflict. Much conflict here may be resolved by professional and courteous communication, rather than simply dismissing media members.

Sports organizations can also manage public relations processes through learning from others, both good and bad. There are multiple news articles of organizations that succeeded and failed with public relations efforts, and sports organizations can use this information to inform their own public relations practices. Additionally, metrics and analytics play a major role in public relations campaigns now. Through things like website hits, analytics on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, organizations can assess what public relations content is having the most effective with each of its identified publics, and conversely, what is not having an effect, and use that data to refine their public relations messaging to ensure they are given each public the most optimal messaging.

### **2.2.1 Evaluating and Adjusting in Sports Public Relations**

Sports public relations is something that requires constant attention and consistent adjustment. In other words, organizations no longer have 6 months to sit back and evaluate the success of a campaign and then try a new one if results are ineffective. To be sure, sports public relations professionals need to avoid making snap judgments as well, the key then, is to find a balance in terms of timeframes so the organization is making appropriate adjustments in their public relations strategy. In evaluating public relations messaging, sports public relations professionals need to determine indicators for success



- what does success look like for a campaign or message? For example, a sports organization might disseminate a public relations video focused on the positive work the organization is doing in the community with an indicator of success being audiences showing positive sentiment towards the organization, which is measured through a social media analytics program. The organization can use the data from this program to determine the quantity of positive sentiment and assess if the campaign succeeded. Whether through analytics or other measures such as social media comments, media hits, or website traffic, evaluating public relations messaging involves some feedback mechanism. Keep in mind that not all feedback will be positive to the organization and that's okay! While negative feedback is not desirable, it does help the organization to see what its publics are perceiving and to identify strategies to adjust their public relations messaging.

In adjusting public relations messaging, sports organization may look at a variety of factors such as the message content, the message channel, timing of the message and external factors that may have affected the success of a message (e.g., perhaps a national news story broke and that resulted in the organization not getting much attention). The evaluative process can help organizations determine which elements of a campaign or message they can alter for the future to achieve a more effective result. Once organizations initiate the change and disseminate a new message and campaign, they must continue to be receptive to feedback. Public relations are a constantly evolving function. Audience needs and preferences are continually changing and sports public relations professionals must be aware of this environment. Additionally, while metrics and analytics can be used to help measure success or identify areas needing improvement, it is important not to become too dependent on these as well or at least, not to let metrics inhibit creativity. Sports public relations professionals who frequently evaluate public messaging and adjust messaging to feedback will see stronger and more holistic public relations with their audience.

### **2.2.2 Managing Media Relationships and Conflict**

As has been discussed in the lesson, sports organizations are moving away from a sports-information model (e.g., mostly communicating with press releases) and taking a more active approach to public relations, which involves the organization generating and disseminating its own media, which tends to put the organization in direct competition with the media. Certainly, there has been a shift to more organizationally driven media in recent years, with the development of platforms like the National Football League (NFL) Network, Major League Baseball (MLB) Network, National Basketball Association (NBA) Television, and major collegiate athletic conference's developing their own broadcast networks as well. Yet, as Internet and social media technology has proliferated, every sports organization has now a platform to tell their stories directly to their publics, and circumvents the media to do so. This outcome does not necessarily reduce the need for the media,



as sports organizations can benefit from its media relationships, but it is important to recognize the shift that has taken place, understanding that some consumers will be looking for content on the organization's platforms which they may or may not supplement with information provided by the mainstream media. As sports organizations take a more active role in generating media content and performing public relations, there is a potential for conflict, as some media members may feel they are losing access. Indeed, some sports organizations have hired media members to write for the organization's internal media outlets and, in doing so, do not give media members access to content that was previously available to them.

As sports organization work with media members through potential conflict in this area, it is important to remember that media members still have an influential platform for coverage. Thus, while sports organizations may be limiting certain stories available to the media, this change should be communicated amicably, as conflict with media members can become a public relations issue. Additionally, there are stories that sports organizations will likely not tell or are restricted from telling, so understanding that media members are telling those stories necessitates trying to handle conflict here in a professional manner. For example, if an organization experiences a scandal, they may be unlikely to report the scandal via their internal media (although they certainly could use their internal media to talk about the response to the scandal). However, the media will likely be covering this story, and if the organization has tried to manage conflict here in an amicable manner, the media may be more favorable in how they cover the organization's story. Additionally, some sports organizations may have limited resources, and thus, may rely more on the media than larger sports organizations. In these situations, giving the media access to stories, even ones that the organization could tell, may help reduce conflict and promote positive coverage. While it is likely impossible to prevent any conflict in this area given the changing media environment, organizations that adopt a transparent and professional communicative process to handling and addressing conflict with media members will have less turbulence in this area.

### **2.2.3 Learning from the Example of Others**

The proliferation of media outlets has increased the ability for public relations practices, both positive and negative, to be disseminated to wide audiences. While sports organizations certainly want to be mindful that one of their public relations campaigns does not end up as a textbook example, it is important to be aware of the consequences that other organizations have experienced with their public relations efforts and learn from them. For example, if a sports organization is seeking to generate a public relations campaign that will lead to positive sentiment amongst millennial audiences, they can research other organizations that have obtained success with this particular audience, see what strategies they used and then tailor those strategies to their own campaign (being sure not to plagiarize).

Often, organizations that experience negative public relations effects end up making national news. As discussed earlier in the lesson, public relations are a function that requires evaluation and adjustment. One beneficial way that evaluation can occur is by organizations researching what went wrong for organizations with their public messaging. For example, perhaps an organization used a hashtag in a public relations campaign that they thought would foster engagement and connection with the audience and instead, the audience ended up re-appropriating the hashtag in ways that cast a negative reflection on the organization. In this case, public relations staff can learn to be thoughtful in the types of hashtags they use and, in doing so, help to mitigate negative public relations effects. As another example, a sports organization may be thinking about making a player available for a question and answer session on Twitter to foster positive public relations with the audience. However, the player has had some previous legal issues and the organization is worried that might dominate the conversation. Before launching this campaign, public relations staff can research other examples where sports organizations have made a player with these circumstances available and assess the results and use that to inform their own campaign.

One of the valuable aspects of the Internet and social media is that organizations can evaluate what other organizations are doing with public relations and determine how effectively those strategies might benefit the organization as well as to assess issues other organizations have experienced with public relations and how the organization can prevent similar things from happening. Additionally, there are consistent conversations (chats) amongst public relations and sports public relations professionals on social media platforms such as Twitter that can be great tools to learn from the experience of others. There is a wealth of collective intelligence available that sports public relations professionals can learn from to strengthen their own competencies and benefit the public relations messaging in their organization.

#### **2.2.4 Data Analytics and Resources to Manage Sport Public Relations**

Data analytics, or metrics, have become a common tool that organizations use to evaluate many functions such as Human Resources, Marketing, and Customer Service. So, it is not surprising to see analytics being used in public relations. In the past, it has been difficult to quantify public relations messaging. For example, if a sports organization put up a billboard advertising their community relations efforts, how many people saw this? Did it create positive sentiment about the organization? Certainly, with focus groups and people calling/writing to the organization or mentioning the organization in media, sports organizations could assess campaign success to some degree. However, with the shift to digital and Internet-based technologies, sports organizations have a variety of



platforms they can draw from to evaluate effectiveness. Using the current example of the billboard message promoting community relations work, if that same sports organization posted that message on Facebook, they could not only determine what demographic would be exposed to the message, but they could see how many people consumed the message, and how many people shared the message, which would give them an indicator of increased visibility. Additionally, if the organization posted a link in the message to their website, they could see how many people clicked through to the website and what potential action they may have taken once there (perhaps the organization linked the message to an online donation portal for one of the non-profit organizations they support). Through Internet and social media platforms, sports organizations can evaluate the success of their public relations campaign through the metrics provided by these platforms. While it may not be an exhaustive measure, this data nevertheless provides a gauge of how well the public the organization is trying to reach is responding to their campaign. Whereas metrics and data analytics are necessary tools in public relations management, they do little good without a plan, or goals in place to determine success. Thus, sports public relations professionals need to ensure that goals for campaigns and messages are clearly defined so appropriate metrics can be used. Otherwise, there will be little value in using analytics, as there is nothing to benchmark or assess the data against.

Additionally, whereas metrics are valuable tools for sports organizations to employ in the management of public relations, there are other tools the organization can use as well. Focus groups with select stakeholders may have value as well. For example, a meeting of targeted season-ticket holders could help the organization understand how that public perceives the organization's reputation, what they believe the organization is doing well and what could be improved. As another example, if the sports organization was a minor league football club, they could target people within the community to participate in a focus group to help the organization understand its public reputation. Thus, mixing data-driven approach with humanistic strategies is an optimal way for sports organizations to assess public relations effectiveness.

Managing public relations in contemporary sports organizations is a challenging process. Sports organizations now have more resources at their disposal to perform public relations, and the advent of Internet and social media technology has shifted sports public relations to a proactive, rather than reactive function. It does require effort to identify stories and content that promote the organization to its publics, but sports public relations professionals who undertake the effort to understand what information the organization's publics want, how they want it delivered, and who are receptive to feedback, both through traditional and emerging tools such as data analytics, will see their organization cultivate and perpetuate an effective public relations program.

