

Module 4. Sports Public Relations and Social and Digital Media

Imagine the following scenario:

Charles Guillard has just been hired as the Public Relations Director for a national hockey organization whose primary mission is to promote hockey across the country and also offers select tournaments for elite amateur prospects. Charles has assumed his job duties several days before the organization's premiere showcase tournament.

During the interview process, Charles was surprised to learn that the organization did not really pay much attention to social and digital media. He was told that the organization did most of their promotion through their website and e-mails, and relied on established press relationships to generate news coverage. Given that the organization is working largely with younger athletes, Charles asked during the interview process about efforts to educate players on social media, or what the organization communicated about appropriate behavior on social media during the tournaments. Charles was told that the organization did not really pay much attention to the social media use of the athletes, as they figured that was something for the athletes' parents to worry about and handle.

As Charles reflects on his interview experience, he remembers that the athletes arrived for the tournament the previous night. Charles decides to take some time and look at what some of the players are posting on Instagram. As he consults the roster of athletes and begins to search on Instagram, he notices a call coming in on his phone.

Charles answers the phone and is greeted by one of the local media members asking Charles for comment about what one of the athletes at the tournament has posted on Snapchat. Charles indicates that he is not aware of the incident and asks the reporter for details. The reporter informs him that a Snapchat post is circulating showing the player inhaling what appears to be narcotics. Charles tells the reporter he has no comment at the current time.

Charles hangs up and immediately calls Elsa Schneider, the Executive Director of the organization and explains the situation. As Charles is talking to Elsa, he searches for the athlete's name on Twitter and finds that the athlete's name is trending. Charles tells Elsa they better meet immediately and devise a public relations response, as he also notices that part of the Twitter commentary involves people tagging the hockey organization's Twitter account, asking if the athlete is going to be suspended for the tournament.



Unit 4.1 Practicing Sports Public Relations with Social Media

Social media technologies have introduced profound changes for organizations as it pertains to public relations. Prior to social media, organizations had more control over how fast a story circulated and could work with media members and media organizations to try and mitigate damage. However, in the contemporary era of digital and social media, organizations must now compete with a variety of voices that may not have the entire view of a story, as they work to introduce public relations responses. Additionally, social media has cultivated immediacy within the audience and organizations are often pressed with having to get information out quickly, both to get their version of the story out, and to compete with other narratives, as media members now face immediacy demands from their constituents as well. Once an organization has disseminated a public relations response via social media, the feedback must be gauged to assess how the messaging is being received and to counteract potential negative effects. For instance, if an organization uses a hashtag in their messaging, and audiences re-appropriate, or hijack this hashtag in a way that reflects negatively on the organization, the organization will need to adapt to this response.

Social media does possess some advantages for organizations in designing their message and provides them with some capabilities to highlight certain aspects of messages that they feel will resonate most with the public and other stakeholders. However, organizations must also be careful not to enflame public relations on social media, which is why care and caution must be used in responding to social media feedback. For instance, if an organization is receiving negative commentary from social media users, trying to argue is only going to escalate the situation and make the organization look worse. Thus, in some situations, it may be better not to say anything at all, even though it can be frustrating to hear people speaking negatively of the organization. As one example here, a sports organization that has just traded a popular player may get negative feedback from fans on social media. While the organization can attempt to frame this move positively in terms of providing financial savings or acquiring players to build for the future, nothing the organization communicates on social media is going to bring the player back, and thus, riding out the wave of negativity may be desirable. Contrast that situation to an incident where fans are complaining about a service issue at the area, the organization has more ability to solve the issue or resolve the concern via social media.

It is important that managers in sports organizations be aware of how easily a public relations issue can be created via social media, and that how that issue is handled is equally important. In the contemporary media world, audiences have active ways of communicating and pressuring sports organizations. Although social media does offer sports organizations some control over what narratives get released,



they have no control over how active audiences respond to those narratives, including taking them in unanticipated or unfavorable directions. Social media is a valuable public relations tool, but must be exercised with care and with mindfulness of the active audiences and the multiplicity of voices that now dominate social media conversations.

4.1.1 Social Media and the Creation of Public Relations Issues

There are a variety of ways that a public relations issue can be initiated for a sports organization. For example, an athlete or coach can be arrested, a ticket price increase may enrage fans, or the organization may shift strategy by trading established veteran players in favor of younger, more inexpensive players. Social media has escalated the potential for public relations issues in several ways. First, social media is very difficult for public relations professionals to entirely control. That is, while the organization can have policies and guidelines for use and can actively monitor what athletes and other organizational employees are posting, issues can still manifest. For example, a player may have archived social media content, posted when they were a teenager, that someone finds and circulates on social media. Additionally, a player may use video features such as Instagram Live to record something occurring in the locker room. Given how easy it is to access and post something on social media from a mobile device, there is no way to possibly monitor every possible situation, and spontaneous reactions only enhance the potential for public relations issues. Second, social media use by sports organizations can create public relations issues. Here, even well-meaning attempts can initiate a public relations issue. For instance, consider the popular #ask campaigns that are used on platforms like Twitter where fans are invited to submit questions for an organizational employee to answer. If the athlete or team employee being made available has had some issues, a well-meaning attempt to engage fans can quickly morph into a public relations dilemma. Consider a case where an organization elects to make an athlete who had had a history of legal issues available. It is very possible that the campaign will evolve into people asking questions about the legal incidents, rather than genuine questions. It is also important to remember the public nature of social media, in that campaigns on social media may be intended for fans or another specific stakeholder group, but there is no guarantee that only that audience will participate. As a result, some sports organizations are turning to private, invite-only campaigns where it can be easier to verify that the intended stakeholder group will access the campaign.

Thus, the creation of public relations issues on social media arises from two fronts: (a) content posted by athletes or other team employees, which sports public relations professionals and other team employees cannot entirely prevent; (b) team-initiated social media content, which sports public relations professionals and others do have



more control over. As it has been discussed in this lesson, having a public relations plan in place can help to prevent these issues, to make sure that appropriate people are commenting on stories, and certainly vetting of those who have access to post from organizational social media accounts is important as well. Indeed, it is important for the organization's public relations and social media plans to have some alignment, making sure that those responsible for posting social media content are aware of expectations for handling crisis situations (e.g., not arguing with fans, or posting demeaning things about those who say negative things about the organization). Public relations issues on social media cannot be entirely prevented, but with some planning and identification of potential threats (e.g., assessing risk from athletes/team employees posting content and taking proactive steps to educate those athletes/employees) can help sports organizations reduce their public relations risk on social media.

4.1.2 Social Media and the Active Audience

One of the major shifts that social media has introduced is the creation of the active audience. In other words, through social media, audiences are no longer passive, but can actively respond to messages disseminated by organizations. Certainly, audiences have always had this capability (e.g., sending letters/e-mails to the organization, calling 1-800 customer service numbers), but those efforts were largely private and for the most part, out of the public view. However, with social media, that is no longer the case. Indeed, many people now voice their customer service issues on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and as others see these messages, they can participate in the spreading of these messages, and in some cases, disgruntled individuals can generate hashtags that quickly spread that cast the organization in a negative light. This audience activity has been known to force organizations to make changes as the pressure mounts not only from aggregated social media messages, but also from the media often seizing on this activity and covers what is happening, magnifying the pressure placed on organizations.

Thus, the question becomes what can be done about the active audience? First, it is important to remember that the organization cannot control the active audience. There is always going to be a certain segment of people who are disgruntled or who seek to cause trouble (e.g. trolls) so trying to prevent all negative comments about the organization is simply not realistic. What the organization can do is be mindful of planning for the active audience in campaigns. For example, returning to the earlier example of making the athlete with a history of legal issues available for a Twitter #ask campaign, public relations professionals need to anticipate how the active audience is likely to respond. In this case, it may be advisable to make a different athlete available for the campaign. Second, the organization needs to be aware of the pulse of the audience pertaining to social issues. For example, if the organization has plans to have a political leader as a guest at the stadium, they need to be mindful of public perceptions of that



political leader and plan accordingly for the response. Certainly, sports organizations should not let the fear of the active audience dictate their decision-making, and in some scenarios, no matter what the organization decides to do, there is going to be pushback. However, sports public relations professionals do need to be mindful of the active audience and anticipate responses the organization can deploy to counter negative pushback. Another potential solution for sports organizations here is to make sure they are cultivating strong relationships with stakeholders as often, when an organization is getting negative feedback on social media, loyal customers or fans will step in and defend the organization, essentially providing public relations work for free! Of course, sports organizations need to develop positive relationships with their stakeholders for a variety of reasons, but one argument for doing so, is that in situations where the active audience is directing negative attention towards the organization, loyal followers will step up and defend the organization.

One common characteristic with social media is that it cannot be controlled. It is important to remember that while sports organizations cannot control the active audience, they can certainly anticipate responses and work to identify appropriate responses should the active audience engage in a way that reflects negatively on the organization.

4.1.3 Social Media and Controlling and Shifting the Public Relations Narrative

Given the multiplicity of voices in social media, sports organizations have no guarantee that the narratives they introduce to handle public relations issues will be accepted by the audience. Whereas that has always been the case, sports organizations must now compete with narratives that publicly challenge those introduced by the organization. For example, media members and the public can generate messaging that cast skepticism on the public relations messaging initiated by the sports organizations. With that said, sports organizations do have a valuable capability with social media, as they can control the narratives that they put out. Whereas in the past, sports organizations tried to influence favorable coverage from the media (and they still do), sports organizations have now their own media channels to tell their story in the ways that they see fit, and which highlight certain aspects of the story that the organization feels are important, which may not be included in mainstream media coverage of the story. For example, consider a sports organization that decides to rebuild and thus, begins to trade away established veteran players, in favor of younger, more inexpensive players. This strategy may lead media members to criticize the sports organization. However, through a video posted on the organization's website, the organization can tell its story about this transition. Perhaps the video can feature the new players talking about the opportunity they have been given, as well as using images and music to help keep fans excited. The organization can then disseminate this video across their social media websites to increase circulation and through such efforts, criticism



from the media may be less prominent in the minds of fans and other stakeholders.

Of course, once a sports organization generates a narrative, they must monitor feedback and be willing to adapt and shift the narrative as needed. Returning to the previous example of the sports organization transitioning through a rebuilding process, if the initial video generated by the organization does not quell criticism, the organization needs to look for ways to shift the narrative towards the organization enduring some short-term pains for long-term benefit. As one example, the sports organization may decide to bring in a group of season-ticket holders and fans for a meeting with organizational executives who explain the team's decision and a question-and-answer session with fans is provided. The organization could create video around this event, including comments from fans who express their appreciation for the opportunity and who convey support for the team's decision, and this video could again be posted on the organization's website and shared via the organization's social media accounts. Whereas sports organizations need to pay attention to and monitor feedback, at some shifting the narrative may involve introducing other narratives. If we continue with the current example, no matter what the organization does, there will always be a segment of fans who will be unhappy with the organization's decision to rebuild. Thus, at some point, the organization can shift the narrative by featuring other accomplishments, such as the organization's community service efforts.

Social media provides sports organization with valuable benefits in terms of being able to tell their own story and shift narratives that may be unfavorable to the organization. This process comes with an understanding that no matter what the organization does, there will always be some portion of stakeholders who are unsatisfied, and the organization must then assess the point of diminishing returns, and assess at what point the organization can move on and shift the narrative by focusing on other organizational achievements and accomplishments.

4.1.4 Social Media and Going Silent

One decision sports organizations can make when using social media for public relations is to avoid using social media. In other words, there may be times when the best thing for the organization to do is to go silent and rely on more uni-directional forms of public relations such as press releases. For example, consider a sports organization that has an athlete arrested for domestic violence. The athlete and organization decide to hold a press conference to address the issue, and also elects to tweet out comments from the press conference. Suppose that during the press conference, the athlete and/or organizational employees commit some speaking missteps which are subsequently tweeted out. One potential outcome here is that the active audience can perceive the organization is condoning domestic violence, or minimizing the seriousness of the issue. In fact, the organization is not doing this,

and is attempting to be transparent. However, that may not be the perception that the audience takes away from the public relations efforts. Every sports organization is unique and will have different challenges, but it is important to remember that while social media can be a valuable tool in handling public relations issues, sometimes it may be better not to use these platforms to reduce the risk of negativity aggregating and circulating across social media.

Social media is a valuable tool for sports organizations. This technology has introduced significant changes for sports organizations in terms of their marketing, communication, customer service, and public relations. While these benefits are noteworthy, it is important that the risks are assessed and anticipated. Sports organizations must be mindful that the active audience will be a major factor in their public relations messaging and planning for how the active audience will react, what narratives will work most effectively for the organization to convey, and identifying personnel risks for public relations on social media can help sports organizations reduce their public relations risk, and make public relations management a value-added, rather than a risk-laden enterprise.

