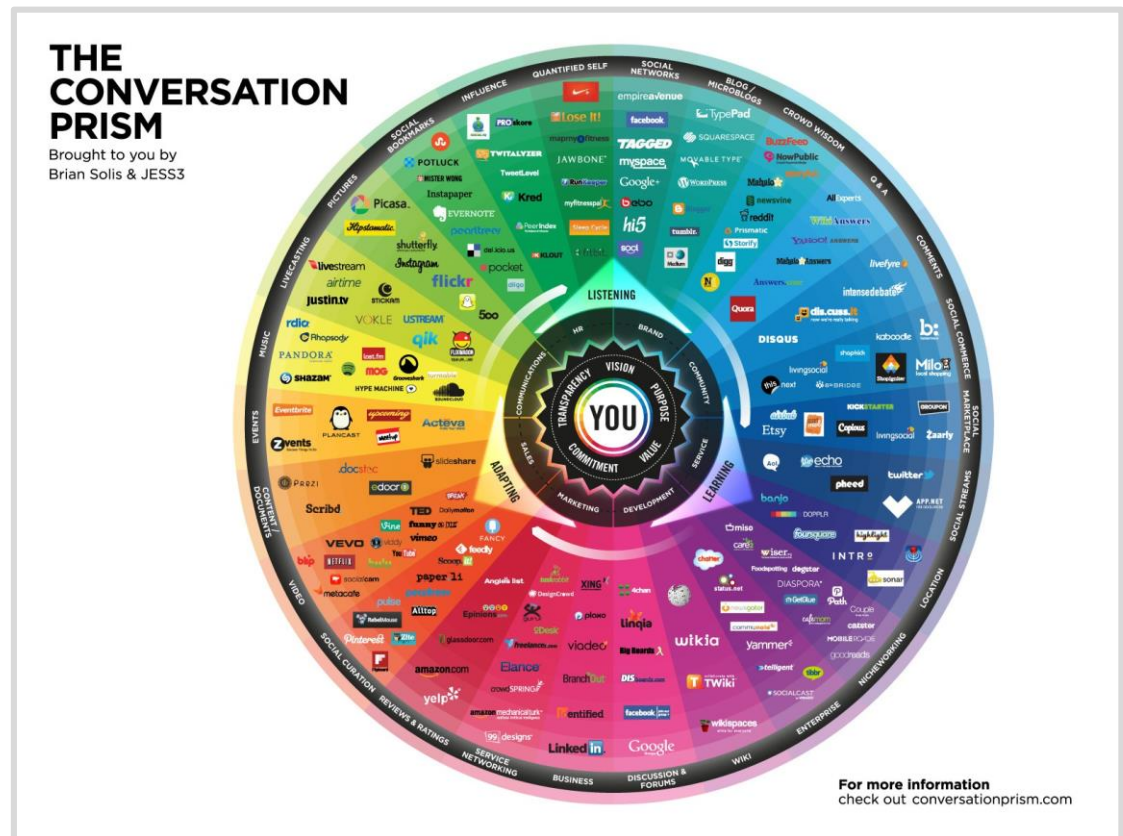


2.2 Building Relationships with the Media

Because the Internet has changed sports organizations' relationship to the consumers and because the content available to consumers has exploded, organizations now need journalists more than they ever have to place content. The media landscape is very crowded with lots of television channels, publications, blogs, and websites available to consumers. This doesn't even include the dizzying array of social media available for fans. To visualize the social media landscape in one snapshot, for example, examine the "The Conversation Prism" created by Brian Solis and JESS3 (2013) below.

Source: Solis & Thomas, 2013, <https://goo.gl/WSlBsX>



This simple diagram reveals the incredible number of opportunities available to communicate with journalists, both professional and amateur, about your organization through social media in addition to the opportunities of traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers. Given the complexity of this landscape, how should Beth go about building relationships with the media to increase the popularity of the Titans? Why did Beth invite Jack Vergara to lunch for the exclusive interview? How can your organization not only build communication

with consumers but also with the media? Let's take a look at four principles that might guide your work.

2.2.1 Reading and Distributing Journalists' Work

Remember that communication requires two-way interaction: listening and speaking. Historically, organizations pushed information to journalists and the journalists sorted through the material for the most interesting nuggets. In this model, the journalists relied on the organizations to provide the content and the arrow, much like that with consumers, went one way from organization to journalist.

In the new model, however, the communications staff (or those individuals tasked with communicating with the media) must read the information presented by journalists and must share that information. Metaphorically speaking, your organization has to demonstrate that it "listens" to journalists and that it values their ideas by sharing that content to others. Again, think about the way a conversation works. If you meet somebody at a party and they only talk AT you, but don't actually listen to your point of view or give you the chance to speak, how likely are you to value that person's opinions? By comparison, if you have a good dialogue with another person, you are more likely to seek out their conversation again in the future and you are more likely to share their opinions with others.

With journalists, the same concepts apply. If you know what types of content and topics are important to a specific journalist and then you share that content, you have essentially told that journalist "I have listened to you and I value what you had to say." Psychologically, that makes the journalist more likely to engage with you. Pragmatically, it means that you know what that journalist values and you can feed the journalist content that appeals to their interests. Recall the prior concepts about the "Four Cs." The same thing applies here where your job as the manager of a sports organization is to anticipate the wants and needs of journalists.

2.2.2 Interacting Face-to-Face and Online

It would be easy to assume from the previous topic that we only need to interact with journalists online through their blogs, twitter feeds, or email. However, face-to-face conversation is far more powerful—and personal—than any online medium. If the goal of communicating with journalists is to build relationships, than the best way to do that is by meeting them in person whenever it is feasible. For local sports clubs working with local media this idea carries even more weight. Personal relationships can greatly influence not only the type of content that a journalist will publish (more positive than negative, for example) but also the quantity they will publish. If you have built a strong relationship with a journalist through face-to-face interactions, they are more likely to speak positively of your organization more often than if they don't know you. Beth wants to have lunch with Jack Vergara for exactly this reason: to re-build a broken relationship with an influential journalist.

While face-to-face interaction builds the strongest relationships, online communication also builds relationships. Interacting differs slightly from “listening and sharing” outlined in the previous section. Interacting consists of asking questions, sending information, maintaining two-way direct contact not only about your organization but also about what's important to the journalist. These types of interactions can occur via email, Twitter, Facebook, or other media that allow you to converse with journalists. Be careful, however, of trying to be too “friendly” with a journalist right away. Think again about how you build “real relationships:” you slowly build rapport, then credibility, then trust over repeated and deepening interactions. Acting like a new acquaintance is your best friend will likely backfire. The informal nature of online media encourages us to express ourselves in a more friendly manner than a situation might warrant, so be careful to build online relationships formally at first then gradually become more familiar.

2.2.3 Sharing and Withholding Information

All relationships rely on sharing information. For example, Beth is going to share an exclusive story with Jack Vergara that will enable him to break an important story about the Titans. Journalists, like all people, like to believe that they are receiving quality information and that you are telling the truth. There's an old adage that it takes a lifetime to build trust and a moment to destroy it. This rings true with journalists because false or misleading information will cause journalists to mistrust you and if they mistrust you, they are more likely to begin looking for negative information to confirm their bias.

However, sharing accurate information does not mean sharing all the information all of the time. The famous U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is believed to have said this: "Always tell the truth; just don't always be telling it." In other words, we must to be honest when we do speak to others but we don't always have to tell everybody everything that we know. For example, Beth is going to tell Jack Vergara about the new coach—and only Jack. She has chosen to withhold information from some journalists and give it to another. That choice is strategic because she's attempting to rebuild a trusting relationship with Vergara. Similarly, however, Beth is not going to reveal information about Stargell's salary. That's private information that Vergara doesn't need to know. In other words, Beth is sharing and withholding information simultaneously and walking the line between what to share and what to withhold can sometimes be very tricky. When in doubt, disclose.

Be careful, however, of withholding information that others might already know or trying to cover-up stories. Denying information that you know to be true is the same as lying and journalists will punish you for it. If a journalist asks a question and you don't want to address that topic, it's easy to say "We're gathering more information and I'll get back to you once we have the full story." That allows you to control the narrative—the available facts—by telling the reporter you'll give them information in the future. It recognizes that the news exists, you know about it, and that you'll address it in the future. That means, of course, that you **MUST** address it in the future. Forgetting to address it will be perceived as lying or hiding information which will break the trust with journalists.

2.2.4 Providing Value to Journalists

Journalists have a job to do, and like all of us, they like for it to be as easy as possible. Therefore, your job is to provide information to journalists in a way that is easy for them to publish. Recall that building relationships requires understanding what is important for a journalist (or any other person, for that matter) and helping that person to meet their needs. Journalists are under constant pressure to generate new content in the very crowded media landscape we now inhabit and so providing value means giving journalists information that they can use. It requires that we be selective about the information we share because if we share everything, then that simply overwhelms the journalists and they will stop listening. Ironically, providing value to journalists means that they are more likely to be of use to you because if you consistently make their job easier, they will view your organization more positively which results in more positive press. Both you and the journalist benefit.

These four concepts of dealing with journalists should come as no surprise because they reflect the way we build successful relationships in our personal lives. It's strange that we think things somehow work differently at work than they do at home. They don't. Relationships are relationships and they rely on trust and continued honest, open, meaningful communication builds that trust. In an age where so much information circulates due to the vast array of available media channels, building relationships can be more complicated and time consuming than in the past because we have more people we need to interact with. However, those interactions are more important now than ever because of the Internet and how it connects all of us so easily and empowers anyone to openly share their opinions (Andrews 2005).

Key Takeaways

- 1) Sports communication has a long history and became an influential force around 1850.
- 2) Sports communication evolved from print media such as newspapers and magazines, to radio, to television, to the Internet.
- 3) The traditional model of sports communication was to “push” information to fans and consumers. The model began to change to “pull” with the introduction of satellite television and more choices.
- 4) The Internet completed the transition to a “pull” model of communication because all organizations now must authentically interact with their consumers and fans.
- 5) Face-to-face conversation is the fundamental paradigm of all communication and social media in particular require building relationships built on turn-taking, sharing, and listening.
- 6) Rather than focusing on the “Four Ps” organizations now focus on the “Four C’s” which reflect the transition to interaction among organizations and consumers.
- 7) The media landscape is now more crowded than it ever has been and organizations must build successful relationships with journalists to successfully place content about the organization.
- 8) Building successful relationships with journalists requires authentically interacting with them through reading and sharing their content; interacting both face-to-face and online; sharing and withholding information; and providing value to journalists which makes their jobs easier.

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