

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.

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 messages, 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, what has happened is *hashtag hijacking* wherein audiences use the hashtag to introductive 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.

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).

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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