

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 issues 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.

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 endowed 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 now 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 their responses. 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.

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 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 thinking is unlikely to be unanimous in each of these groups, so organizations need to account for differences within them that may affect 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 determine 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.

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 & Bravold, 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, and there is likely to be pushback no matter what choice is made.

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
<i>Denial</i>	
Simple Denial	Did not perform act
Shifting Blame	Another performed act
<i>Evade Responsibility</i>	
Provocation	Responded to another's act
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
Accident	Mishap
Good intentions	Meant well
<i>Reducing Offensiveness</i>	
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
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to repair/prevent recurrence
<i>Mortification</i>	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 is 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.