

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 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 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 the organization should be taking advantage by using its resources to tell its story.

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 more *after* a crisis has happened, rather than cultivating positive relationships consistently *before* a crisis. In the contemporary era of media convergence, and the often 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 ways the organization can promote the sponsor 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 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 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 public the organization is trying to reach. In doing so, the sports organization can take routine content and make 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 hash tag 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 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 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 over 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.