

When Sports PR Needs Some PR

Public relations case studies and the handling of controversial issues like athletes' behavior, drug use, health consequences, and organizational error

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“The most important thing for a young man is to establish a credit... a reputation, character.” - John D. Rockefeller

The 2017 United Airlines scandal shook flight consumers across the world, but its PR response to that incident was even more frightening. Specifically in the sports industry, there has been an abnormal amount of these tone-deaf excuses for a crisis communication strategy. Especially after watching some of the newly released 2016 OJ Simpson documentaries, it seems that his lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, knew how to reverse sports scandals better than today’s multi-million dollar organizations/athletes. The famous lawyer was able to convince half the country to support a dead-to-rights murderer over their fellow police force. After witnessing the downfall of Baylor, Penn State, Ray Rice, Lance Armstrong, and many others it seems that a bad reputation is usually the Achilles heel to a present-day Hercules. There are many reasons why the fallout of some of the greatest athletes and organizations over the past decade could've been avoided and how they ended up getting as chaotic as they did. PR strategists are supposed to be the doctors that stop the bleeding, but lately it seems organizations and athletes are dying from simple flesh wounds. The industry has received a negative reputation for the decisions of unqualified executives and athletes who try to handle the PR response themselves...usually contained within a 140 character tweet too. Due to the inconsistencies of PR case studies within the last decade, there needs to be a revolution in marketing strategies for sports organizations in the US and how they deal with controversies like athlete behavior, drug use, health consequences, and organizational error. This will allow PR to be considered a science instead of a simple creative process and be a necessary aspect of every business. After exploring dozens of bad case studies, one can almost create an equation towards reputation rehabilitation and mass appeal that allows even the beginners of crisis communication to follow strict guidelines to help them avoid any inflammation of scandals. This will help bring stability around the vagueness of the PR industry and hopefully save athletes/teams millions of the unnecessary costs that come with unacceptable PR strategies.

Case Studies

Penn State (Negligence)

“Negligence is the rust of the soul that corrodes through all her best resolves.”

- Owen Feltham

Penn State will be infamously remembered for its association with Jerry Sandusky. A legendary football powerhouse revered by everyone was reduced to an egregious child sex scandal. It is thought that many people in the organization knew about Jerry Sandusky’s activities and did nothing about it. Whether any coaches or executives actually knew about it

while it was going on remains unproven. But even after the news broke publically, they still refused to address the matter. In an article by Adelphi University titled, *3 Examples Of PR Done Wrong In Sports*, they said, “Despite the University’s knowledge that the scandal was about to blow up, it made the terrible PR decision to batten its hatches and stay silent from March, when the story broke, until November, when it finally hired a PR firm, Ketchum, to clean up the mess. Despite spending over \$208,000 a month in damage control, nothing was able to stop the cascade of bad publicity that followed, and the University has yet to recover its reputation.” Maybe if Penn State issued an immediate response its current reputation would be more positive. All we know is staying silent on the matter for months did not help people forget or its legacy. Natalie Ann Brown of the University of Alabama wrote a dissertation research paper titled, *The Convergence of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Social Media: Empirically Testing the Effectiveness of Sports Fan Enacted Crisis Communication*. In this analysis, she added up the total costs of Penn State's sex abuse scandal especially in accordance with their absent PR strategy. In the paper she wrote, “Sports crises possess the ability to wreck a university’s bottom line through fines, legal fees, loss of sponsorships, and other financial issues. For instance, following a sex abuse scandal at Penn State University, the NCAA levied a \$60 million fine to be paid over the course of five years (McCarthy, 2013). The university also spent \$5.4 million on communications consulting and legal fees, lost over \$1 million in sponsorship money, and saw the money collected from licensed merchandise fall 20% (McCarthy, 2013).” Most of these fees incurred because of their reaction to do nothing for months towards the sandal itself and the PR disaster that followed. Left untreated, their communications consulting fees racked up into the millions to make up for the lost time and ill-prepared strategy.

Baylor University (PR cover-up)

“They like to use those fancy words. They don't like to say “raped,”” he said. “They say “misdeed,” “inappropriate touching,” “mistake.” That's insulting. I'm not a mistake.” - Charles L.

Bailey Jr.

Before 2011, Baylor University was a respected Texas university built on Christian values that created a positive community atmosphere both on and off the field. Now it is a school where 19 of its football players have been charged with sexual or domestic assault since that year. Normally we would be casting more blame on the individual students than the college they

attend, but due to a poor PR decision, Baylor created a culture responsible for this behavior. The problem could have ended at just a couple of football players, if Baylor came forward and promised to clean up their act by educating its students on the seriousness of the situation. But the university decided to cover-up the issue and a couple lone instances became 19. A CBS article titled, *Baylor Sex Assault Scandal Far Worse Than Previously Disclosed*, blasted the university by writing, “Baylor prides itself on its Christian values and creating a caring community. But the ‘60 Minutes Sports’ investigation found a culture where victims who came forward found themselves blamed for violating the university’s code of conduct, which prohibits drinking and premarital sex.” Baylor suddenly became a criminal organization because of their outdated PR methods. In the same article, they mention how one Title IX coordinator couldn’t even get police reports on the accusations.

OJ Simpson (Sincerity)

“This above all: To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” - Shakespeare

In the OJ Simpson trials, it seemed that half of America was feeding off of hatred towards a person they never met. And the other half just wanted revenge for their disdain towards the LAPD. Michael Wilbon, a well-known and respected journalist for ESPN, wrote an article titled, *O.J. Was The Lesser Of Two Evils*, and said, “I was rooting much more against the LAPD than for Simpson.” Ironically, America seems to love to hate. But we don’t seem to fixate our hatred on just anything, it is usually saved for those we distrust the most. Think of the most controversial figures in American history and you will usually find a long list of trust issues (Richard Nixon, Lance Armstrong, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Tom Brady, OJ Simpson, Tiger Woods, etc). Many people believe it’s less about the crime/scandal itself that gets people riled up and more about the lies and question marks that usually follow. This was proved when half of America sided with a seemingly dead-to-rights murderer over a corrupt and racist police force.

OJ would also see his reputation tarnished through this distrust along with the LAPD though. In an ABC News article titled, *The O.J. Simpson Tapes: 7 Shocking Things He Said in Rarely Seen Deposition Tapes*, the author points out that, “Throughout the deposition, Fred Goldman said Simpson was flippant and gave mostly short ‘no, maybe, yes’ answers to his

questions. ‘Nothing was serious to him.’” If you actually watch the deposition tapes, it is hard to say that a sincere person would give answers the way he did. Having a vague memory of the night your wife was murdered and his body language during the interview screams foul play. These brief moments have significant value on a fan’s opinion of you going forward and how much they believe you in the future. One can then pair that sketchy deposition with the amount of times the police were called to the Simpson’s residence for domestic violence. The situation even reached a point where his wife was recorded saying, "He's going to kill me, he's going to kill me" by a police dispatcher. Yes, he was ruled not guilty due to inconsistencies by the LAPD and prosecution, but an unbiased person would have a hard time believing anything from OJ Simpson after that point. I could go on and on with more discrepancies about the case, but there are also many moments before the crime where he isn’t even honest with himself as a person. In a Huffington Post article titled, *O.J. Simpson Didn’t Want To Be Associated With Black America. Then He Came To Symbolize It*, it mentioned a conversation OJ had with the journalist Robert Lipsyte. The article goes on in detail about the conversation by saying, “He overheard a white woman at the next table saying, ‘Look, there’s O.J. sitting with all those n****rs,’” Lipsyte told ESPN. “I remember in my naiveté, saying to O.J., ‘Gee, wow, that must have been terrible for you.’ And he said, ‘No, it was great. Don’t you understand? She knew that I wasn’t black. She saw me as O.J.’” OJ is often regarded as not wanting to identify with his race and culture until he needed it. When he first became a national star he moved out to Brentwood, one of the richest and whitest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. OJ rarely identified with or gave back to the community he grew up in, which makes one think that many aspects of his life were, in a way, a lie. Separately, these small instances during the trial and before wouldn’t usually garner much attention. But the value of them combined would lead many people to assume you’re a deceptive person and therefore unworthy of forgiveness or trust. The general public rarely knows the truth, so we usually base our opinions off of past examples A, B, and C.

Just look at Tom Brady. Never has committed a serious crime, yet is one of the most hated players in the NFL. America hates liars and if you’re deemed as a repeat offender, no one will believe you when you say you’ve changed. Especially when there are so many other honest and hard working players to show your support, there is no reason to respect someone who has never respected you. That is why a reputation is hard to earn back and why there is only so much PR can do. With all the competition for the spotlight, America has no problem tossing you to the

side for any number of the hundreds of trustworthy athletes. Scandal or no scandal, the best thing you can do is get ahead of the public by always telling the truth. The more an individual drags a situation out or continues to disrespect their fan's intelligence by lying, the more ammunition they give the fans to kill their career. Understanding how valuable sincerity is with the public is crucial if you want to maintain a positive and long-term relationship with your audience. Don't underestimate your fans' intelligence...or memory. Learn from OJ Simpson, Tom Brady, Lance Armstrong, and others. Because it's not all about the specific scandals themselves, a lot of the permanent dislike comes from the way athletes react towards those scandals.

Michael Vick (Philanthropy)

"The results of philanthropy are always beyond calculation." Mary Ritter Beard

Michael Vick had one of the greatest falls in NFL history, going from the cover of Madden 2004 to being referred to as Inmate Number 33765-183. Along with being put behind bars, the crime virtually gets you despised by the majority of Americans. After the animal abuse scandal broke out, dog-loving America was determined to put him away physically and mentally. The controversy even caused the former Pro-Bowl Quarterback to declare bankruptcy around 2008. It makes me wonder how a person can go from a notorious fall like that, to still being someone I wouldn't mind my team picking up. A novel titled, *From Vick-Tim to Vick-Tory: The Fall and Rise of Michael Vick*, by Kenneth Robinson stated, "NBC's play-by-play man Al Michaels shared that when the team travels, Vick receives a positive response from the public." Unless you're speaking the language of PR, prison and positive aren't words that are usually thrown around together.

In the pile of misfit athletes, Michael Vick was supposed to be just another lost cause. He, however, did what an NFL superstar does best; put their chin down and get to work. Vick had to address the threat of the dwindling fanbase. Through PR and morality-based moves, Vick was serious to make amends and earn back the trust of the average fan. After paying his dues legally by completing his prison sentence, he helped take the lead against the dogfighting industry. In an article by the Humane Society titled, *Michael Vick And The HSUS's Work To End Dogfighting*, they stated that, "Michael Vick is a messenger for the cause in general, helping to reach new audiences. He's supportive of our Pets for Life program to end dogfighting and helps to spread the message through his public appearances...He served his time in prison, he admitted

his wrongdoing, and his regret, and he determined to make amends.” That determination is what separates the Michael Vick’s from the Greg Hardy’s of the world. While I am not condoning the actions of one athlete over another, the latter is the type to laugh in their apology video and not show any remorse towards the incident. A sincere campaign based on community service and philanthropy can have one seeing dividends for decades after despite the scandal.

New England Patriots (Confidence)

“All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure.” - Mark Twain

New England Patriots, a franchise that has a high amount of controversies in the recent years including deflategate and spygate, but still is ranked in the top 5 for profitability and success. Even with scolding reviews like the one from Bleacher Report titled, *CHEATING SCANDALS WILL FOREVER TARNISH THE BRADY-BELICHICK LEGACY*, people have still managed to look past them. Bleacher Report even wrote, “Just use your mind, embrace the common sense of it all. I've defended Belichick as pushing the boundaries of the rules, right up to the wall, but won't defend him for cheating—for breaking the rules to gain an advantage. It's different now.” Even two years after the news of Deflategate broke, The New York Times wrote an article titled, *Why Do Fans Excuse the Patriots Cheating Past?* So with all this consistent backlash, how are they still one of the most profitable franchises? Many believe it is simple because they keep winning, but I believe it is due to successfully marketing towards their brand’s reputation.

In a way, most fans subconsciously enjoy scandals and admire the “bad boys” of sports. Jason Mazanov wrote a scholarly journal article on this exact phenomenon. The article titled, *The Role Of Scandal And Corruption In Sports Marketing And Sponsorship*, had a very interesting take on the atmosphere of corruption in sports. A quote from this literary piece cited the advertising data behind controversial sports leagues saying, “However, this negative approach to scandal and corruption in sport may be unnecessarily bleak. Evidence sponsors abandon sport because of scandal or corruption is yet to appear. Advertisers still clamour for space in the Super Bowl despite NFL players being arrested for murder, drug trafficking and sexual assault.” Now, the fact that the majority of NFL fans are men may have something to do with this, but the author also pointed out how the recent Olympics were full of scandals and still had a large viewership. It seems to come down to that scandals are actually a form of marketing themselves. One could

say that the Patriots have tapped into the Trump effect, where having the confidence to stand by controversies can sometimes garner success. In Jason Mazanov's article, he concluded that, "Scandal and corruption have an influence on marketing and sponsorship in sport. This collection suggests that the relationship is by no means a negative one, it is far more complex than the popular conception of scandal equals bad. Questions of morality aside, scandal and corruption in sport provide opportunities for marketing and sponsorship." It seems that as long as the scandal isn't violent or widely offensive, then audiences admire people who don't succumb to backlash. Confidence and continued success definitely are a form of PR and are aspects that the New England Patriots, Tom Brady, and Donald Trump have tapped into for years.

Johnny Manziel (Exorbitant)

"Partying is such a sweet sorrow" - Robert Byrne

Johnny Manziel is an NFL player that has earned the reputation for partying. Hasn't gotten caught for anything illegal at those parties, but has been blackballed by the NFL and teams ever since. He was blackballed despite the fact that he was the first ever freshman to pass for over 3,000 yards and win the Heisman trophy. His plethora of college accomplishments led him to be drafted in the first round (22nd overall) by the Cleveland Browns. Despite playing for one of the worst overall teams in the league and being the backup for the majority of his first two seasons, he still put up decent stats and steadily showed signs of improvement. In week 10 of his second season, he was even able to throw for 372 yards and one touchdown on 33 of his 45 passes against the perennial playoff contender Pittsburgh Steelers. Manziel was announced the starting QB on November 17th, but then demoted a week later for partying...A video surfaced where it showed the QB singing and dancing with a bottle of champagne. In an ESPN article titled, *Johnny Manziel demoted after lying to team about timeline of video*, the team claimed they demoted Manziel for lying to the coach about the incident. Even if that were the case, the fact that an individual feels he has to lie about doing something completely supported by NFL advertisements proves greater issues of hypocrisy than simply embellishing on a timeline of events. I mean he just got promoted to starting QB, so can you really blame the guy for legally celebrating? Yes, apparently you can. After it was clear Manziel was still the best QB available, he was renamed the starter and threw for 270 yards and one touchdown on 21 of his 31 passes. He was even able to end a seven game losing streak for the Browns with those stats. Still,

Manziel was released by the team after the season on March 11, 2016 when news kept circulating about his consistent partying. Even after being one of the best college QBs to ever live and putting up decent rookie stats for one of the worst teams, the young QB has yet to be signed by another team. The stigma of partying has no remorse in the public eye and will usually lead to an athlete's downfall. Whether it's through a bad reputation or actual health issues associated with consistent celebration, these types of athletes are a nightmare for PR strategists. Fans also don't really enjoy seeing athletes celebrating. They mostly just want them to put their head down and work on winning them a championship. Despite whatever stats you put up, if you're caught partying too much it is a sign of lack of focus. There is also the issue though that partying leads to scandals and teams/fans don't want to have to deal with a potential scandal every weekend. It is understandable that leagues would want to distance themselves from those types of players since drama/controversial issues completely unrelated to sports have plagued the industry for decades. Consistent partying is never good and rational athletes should have a problem with it just as much as everyone else. It will usually lead to a decline in their athletic ability, scandals, and a downturn in revenue from fans/sponsors.

Humor

"Laughter is the closest distance between two people." - Victor Borge

Many people don't realize it, but often humor is what makes them forget about an athlete's scandals. They say laughter is the best medicine and that applies to PR as well. In recent cases it has proved quite effective in making the average fan either forget about one's past or change their attitude towards the whole story. For example, Peyton Manning is one of the NFL's most likeable alumni, but many people don't even know about his past. When people think Peyton Manning now-a-days (other than NFL plays), they conjure up that Nationwide chicken parm commercial or his bromance with Papa John. Unless it is brought to light by the media, most fans don't think about his sexual misconduct with a personal trainer back in his college days. This is because after a series of humorous marketing campaigns, they found him lovable again. They've downgraded something vulgar to a simple mistake that any impressionable college student could make.

You see this all time time with not just sports. A comedian will often go over the line to get a couple laughs and it is usually taken very well. Now imagine if a politician said a similar

line by your favorite comedian, they may be considered misogynistic or even racist. This is because in a satirical context pretty much anything is fair game, while in a normal context, it could spark nationwide protests (i.e. I often say Donald Trump would make a great comedian). So if you're a person that is seen as a natural "funny guy," anything over the top you might do is often taken lightly. While if you're seen as a serious person, something borderline inappropriate might call for your resignation. If you have seen the show *The Office*, the boss (Michael Scott) is consistently caught making racist comments and sexual jokes. Now if you think about it, Michael Scott and Donald Trump say very similar things. But only one of them is likeable by almost every viewer, while the other has the lowest approval rating of any president according to the *Washington Post*. Specifically pertaining to sports, satire has proven effective in laughing off an athlete's mistakes, while public apologies do virtual nothing for the average fan. When someone sees a public apology, they often disregard it as something their agent made them say or something they don't really mean. When you see someone making jokes about themselves, the common reaction is usually "you know what, we've all made mistakes...give the person a break." This was proven when even Tom Brady attempted the method to laugh off the Deflategate drama. In a recent Footlocker ad, Brady is shown addressing his critics in a restaurant and comedically storming off saying "he lost his appetite." In the comment section most of the posts are pro-Tom Brady, writing how overblown the whole situation was. One may say they are probably all biased Patriots fans, but actually a lot were from rival teams with one comment even saying, "I am a Bills fan and hate Tom Brady for obvious reasons but that is pretty funny. I respect the guy but please retire already." Humor is sometimes seen as the only method effective in breaking the ice between two hard-nosed viewpoints. Similar instances can be seen with athletes like Kobe Bryant and Ray Lewis. The latter accused of playing a role in a murder, so you can see just how truly effective it is. When humor is done correctly, it is often very important in changing widespread public opinion. *Business Mirror* wrote an article titled, *Why Humor Can Be An Effective PR Tool*, and wrote, "ONE safe and sure-fire type is self-deprecating humor, which would indicate the leader does not have an exaggerated sense of self-importance, but is, in fact, humble and a regular guy despite his high office."

Industry Overview and Analysis

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.” - Warren Buffett

The PR industry could use a little crisis communications. While others may think that it has been flourishing because some form of marketing and PR is basically everywhere you look. Its methods have still been getting disrespected mainly due to a lot of basic or underprepared campaigns. MarketingProfs featured an article titled *The Real Reason Public Relations Is Getting Killed* by Lyndon Johnson. She wrote, “The model is broken; the ubiquitous retainer and cookie-cutter PR process do not help the majority of agency customers. The definition has been bastardized to the point that most newcomers to the industry never fully understand the fundamentals of PR.”

Many large companies and organizations fall victim to general and outdated responses that don't adequately remedy a situation. A lot of times the teams are also either underprepared or mismanaged. We all have heard of the companies and stories that never would have been as successful if they didn't utilize quality marketing and public relations campaigns. Not only legendary sports franchises and athletes, but major companies we couldn't imagine living without (Coca-Cola, Nike, Apple to just name a few...) With all those major companies, it's hard to say why some companies get it right and others don't seem to know where to begin. Lyndon Johnson also mentioned in that same article, “Everybody is looking for something to blame for the steady demise of the industry, but they should really be looking in the mirror.” People often think they can handle PR, since they have positively managed their own reputation up until that point. Then, they are faced with difficult situations that can have multiple people/organizations negatively involved and usually have to resort to old textbook strategies or unethical tactics. Unfortunately, now the ideas that come up when thinking of PR are tone-deaf and textbook style communication. Overused practices have led audiences to see right through the message and have caused many recent plights of the industry. Clearly PR wrote an article titled *Why Most PR And Marketing Efforts Are Wrong* as recently as February 1, 2017 and discussed “These are what we call ‘anti campaigns’ – marketing messages that attempt to encourage consumers to change their existing behaviors by taking up the promoter's product or service. Trouble is, they have the *opposite* effect.” Audiences will hear your apology, but will often garner the opposite reaction from it since they have heard those baseless statements in the past.

The industry needs to update its marketing and public relations strategies to fit the psychology of the modern consumer. Use what works and ditch what doesn't. PR experts need to find a way that allows the industry to be consistent across the board. That is the only way marketers will be perceived as necessary in business as accountants are. PR strategists shouldn't have to keep shoveling out the most recent PR disaster to prove why they should be hired. We should be able to use more examples like Volkswagen that show long-term consistency within our profession. Volkswagen is a company that has had effective marketing since their birth. Advertisers still show off their iconic "Think Small" campaign back in the 60s' and how those types of strategies are what prevent them from being crushed by messy scandals. One may recall hearing about the Volkswagen emissions scandal back in 2015 and how much bad publicity it gave them. Yet, in 2016 they were back in the top 2 for most profitable car brands that year. Comeback stories as great as that don't just happen for no reason...not even in sports.

"I believe that people make their own luck by great preparation and good strategy" - Jack Canfield

Within the last decade, we have seen an immediate need for consistent positive responses from athlete/team scandals in the US due to many recent negative PR case studies. Too often public relations teams are scrambling last-minute to come up with a creative solution that will solve all of the controversy in the heat of the moment. The most common counterclaim to this is that you can't come up with an effective answer for a controversial issue until you know the specific problem first and how the public is reacting. I believe that this is false since we know already how many aspects around what a modern PR response should look like. CNW Newswire wrote an article titled, *Myths and Misconceptions: Crisis Management*, and listed its top six crisis management myths. The second common misconception on that list was the phrase "I can't plan for a crisis." This is often why the industry's problems keep occurring and therefore don't allow us the ability to fix them. When we have to think of solutions in the moment we often resort to mediocre tactics that can usually make the situation worse. What many people fail to remember though is that the world has already provided us many examples on what has and has not worked. Also, most athletes and franchises know in advance effective psychological strategies that have previously garnered positive responses from their fan bases. Unfortunately,

even with all this information available, the public continues to see individuals use bush league tactics like cover-ups, negligence, and baseless apology statements. With every scandal we had the chance to learn from, we still see these almost politically-styled responses. This has happened as recently as 2016 with the NHL concussion dilemma. Yes you read that right, I said the NHL. Because the NFL concussion lesson was not enough for an entirely different sports league to continue the concussion PR mishandling... SB Nation published an article titled, *The most interesting and damning details from the unsealed documents in the NHL concussion lawsuit*, releasing a bunch of leaked emails from NHL executives on concussion issues. In the emails, Colin Campbell, a former NHL Senior Vice President, responded to a trainer's message raising concerns about concussion problems saying the man was "an absolute freaking idiot!" Even after the deaths of three former hockey players in the span of 4 months due to concussion related problems, the NHL still engaged in negligence towards the growing PR issue. It took a lawsuit from the NHLPA on November 25, 2013 and a risk to the NHL's profits to truly get the league to pay attention. The PR disaster reached its climax when the leaked emails surfaced in March of 2016. Currently there is a wide spectrum of acceptable PR and ironically most of it is typically not accepted by the public. This gives a misinformed reputation of the PR industry and it's effectiveness. For the industry to be seen as a necessary aspect of every business, teams need to agree on a standard of operations. To further test this analysis, I took an in-depth survey of how the sports industry has handled many of its controversies with 50 random people in Times Square on March 15, 2017. From the table below, you can see how most of the scandals are still thought of negatively with many of the surveyor's answering between the 1-6 rating choices. The only scandal that received above average reviews was the Michael Vick controversy, which I believe was due to the large amount work he did to prevent dogfighting afterwards. In my opinion, he is the only one that has utilized a successful PR response by having a sincere approach to his critics. Other than that, most of the responses were either negative or had no opinion, with some outliers in the Patriots column (probably due to unknowingly surveying some Patriots' fans). Except for the Patriots' column, no other scandal received any responses in the 10's.

Scale of Quality PR (1-10 rating)	NFL Concussion Lawsuit	NHL Concussion Lawsuit	Baylor Domestic Violence Case	Michael Vick Dog Fighting	Patriots Deflategate

1	4	1	5	3	12
2	5	3	7	2	5
3	9	7	7	1	5
4	8	6	10	6	6
5	10	13	8	7	9
6	7	3	4	9	4
7	4	4	3	11	2
8	2	1	0	3	1
9	0	0	1	0	1
10	0	0	0	0	4
No Opinion (Left Blank)	1	12	5	8	1
Total # of Responses	50	50	50	50	50

With the most amount of rankings being in the bottom half of the chart, the claim of value towards changing the PR process has never been higher. Along with regaining huge financial losses, the claim of value towards a prepared crisis management strategy can provide social justice, consumer confidence, and widespread community action. So effective PR can not only be good for the company or individual, but for humanitarian reasons as well. While many people view the NFL's PR response to concussions as a failure due to how long it took them to recognize the issue, eventually they did end up investing millions into the research of brain injuries. A common counterclaim to PR's value begins with many people viewing the position as overrated. Business News Daily published an article titled, *The Most Overrated (and Underrated) Jobs*, and ranked a Public Relations Executive as the 7th most overrated position. Just imagine if the Penn State University received some good PR advice and disclosed the incident to the NCAA/police the second they discovered what was going on. The financial losses would've been a fraction of the cost. The executives may have even been regarded as heroes for stopping the crime before it went any further. Instead, the university had to pay millions for the acts of one man, every person surrounding the team had their reputations tarnished, and two

administrators may even be facing jail time. So whether you care about the ethical aspects of a prepared crisis communication plan or just are interested in the dollar signs, one can't deny that the claim of value to good PR advice is exponential.

"In any enterprise, your perspiration will be inversely proportional to your preparation." - Scott Sorrell

The number of sports figures and organizations that have fallen to scandals is daunting, but they usually still had a crisis communications plan. Whether the quality of it wasn't good or they just decided to ignore it remains to be seen. After researching modern PR disaster plans, it may actually be that the outline was just too general or did not meet the needs of their unique situation. While, it is hard to plan for a situation you do not fully understand, I still believe that you can create an equation-like method to narrow down the best solution by playing into consumer psychology, moral strategies, and social justice. Many PR plans offered though did not include all of these ideas and leaned more on the general side. A side that barely helps when you're seen dragging your wife out of an elevator in the case of Ray Rice. Or dragging a paid customer off a plane in the case of United Airlines. All of the plans didn't account for any sort of dragging actually...Humor aside, this is like strategizing for cancer with the common expression "an apple a day keeps the doctor away!" As I break down these plans, one will be able to see why an athlete/executive would abandon traditional methods for some quick apology they believe will be just as good. The process needs to be more scientific or any confident person will think they can handle the situation all by themselves and just end up creating more backlash towards the PR industry.

Many plans just offer a checklist of what you'll need for a crisis instead of specific case analyses and psychological strategies. Again, this is like telling someone the ingredients to bake a cake and not providing instructions or the right measurements. For example, let's review the Bernstein Crisis Management, which is a large PR firm based out of California. In one of their articles, they give a 10-step guide of preparing for a PR disaster. The article titled *The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications* lists the first step as "Anticipate Crises." This a pretty general statement that doesn't really offer any help in the heat of the moment. The next four steps were "identify your crisis communications team," "identify and train spokespersons," "spokesperson training," and "establish notification and monitoring systems." These basically just tell me what type of

people I will need in the event of an emergency instead of a list of actual solutions and possible ways they could play out. The only notable section out of those first six is “spokesperson training,” but even that just goes into detail about how you need a trained spokesperson instead of a CEO/executive and nothing about the specific training itself. This leads to Step 7, “develop holding statements,” which probably is the closest version to a solution on the list. Holding statements are still pretty general though and are usually just one-two sentence statements that work immediately in cases like natural disasters or unexpected cancellations. The examples they give are “We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our website” and “Our thoughts are with those who were in harm’s way, and we hope that they are well.” As one can see, those don’t really help in a case like Baylor where they covered-up over a dozen assault cases so they could keep playing football. The last three steps basically just remind you to analyze the situation and review your official statement with “assess the crisis situation,” “finalize and adapt key messages,” and “post-crisis analysis.” No wonder so many athletes/executives go rogue in the height of the crisis when a typical plan just consists of vague guidelines.

To remain unbiased, I did find a much better version of a crisis management plan from Northern Illinois University. This plan titled *Crisis Communication Plan: A PR Blueprint* included aspects similar to mine like message positioning, key audiences, and remaining ethical at all times. Right in the beginning sections they touch upon my advice on remaining sincere and not being negligent to the situation by saying, “The first and foremost goal is protecting the integrity and reputation of the Company. Never try to lie, deny or hide your involvement. If you ignore the situation it will only get worse.” Their message positioning also detailed possible explanations like human error, inadequate supervision, and errors of judgement. This was the closest plan to mine, but did not include everything like the value of philanthropy, social justice, and continued success. While more detailed than most, it was also still a little general by not offering successful case studies that would provide them some solutions in the heat of the moment (i.e. Michael Vick, New England Patriots). Also, most plans are mainly focused around the official apology statement and don’t include other aspects that are required during reputation building that case studies would provide. This is why I believe the industry needs to switch over to an adaptable equation that is tailor suited to the athlete/organization’s fan psychology and examples of similar situations (i.e. sports figures would list previous types of athlete scandals,

universities would list previous types of NCAA scandals, etc). A simple copy and paste could end up saving your company millions. Yet, people still wait to sort out the details when the controversy begins and rational thinking declines. This extra pressure caused United Airlines to publish 3 official statements before figuring out one that wouldn't offend anyone. And they definitely will end up paying a lot for each one of those mistakes. It doesn't even take much research to have an effective crisis communications plan. It just matters how much time and effort an athlete/organization is willing to put into their PR strategies. If you get the most basic insurance plan, your coverage is going to suffer when you need it the most. Simply, just invest in your communications department and figure out a plan that doesn't have the company scrambling last minute to figure out a solution.

PR Science and Psychology

“Success depends on previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure” - Confucius

Many people believe these big powerful athletes have similar big powerful public relations strategies behind them. But as we've seen with many of them, like OJ Simpson and Tiger Woods, they are sometimes just as caught of guard as the general public. We've also seen the giant organizations behind these players get endlessly side-swiped by controversies, like the NFL with violent crimes and the NCAA with rule violations. So whatever has been the current process taken by the majority of these “PR experts” obviously isn't working. This has even caused the PR industry ultimately to get a bad rap due to the inconsistencies surrounding their solutions. My goal, is to not only prove that the industry needs to revolutionize the way it currently operates, but also introduce what has generally worked and not worked for baseline operating procedures. Instead of just finding a cheap way to spin the story to their client's favor, this may help the industry develop concrete steps that can prepare PR teams for even the most random scandals.

Somewhere down the line, public relations went political and since then we've seen cover-ups (Baylor, Lance Armstrong), gross negligence (Penn State, concussion research), and bottomless court litigation (NFL, Patriots, etc) as actual PR strategies. The problem is public relations is not politics and political moves don't build relationships. They are filled with lies and

empty promises to gain short-term trust. Sporting News wrote an article titled, *NFL Finally Paying For Its Double Standards And Hypocrisy* and pointed out the Josh Brown incident as an example by saying, “Brown was suspended for the first game of the season after being arrested in connection with a domestic violence incident. The baseline policy for a violation of the NFL's personal conduct policy is a six-game punishment, but Brown was never formally charged by law enforcement.” On top of that, the author blasted the NFL by saying, “As such, the League of Integrity figured a one-game suspension would be plenty, having apparently learned nothing from the Ray Rice incident and years of incompetent law and order.” When you make these short-term political moves and create baseless policies, the public will pick up on that eventually. And it seems that the NFL may finally be forced to do something about their PR problem since analysts at MoffettNathanson reported a 12% slide for the 2016 season TV ratings according to an article by Business Insider titled, *The NFL Season Is Over - But Its Ratings Problem Might Just Be Getting Started*. It is baffling to think that the NFL still doesn't realize why they have a ratings problem, but for me and many millions across the country, it is largely because they aren't able to maintain a positive relationship with fans. PR has and always will be long-term relationship between the client and the general public. That is why the industry needs to switch back to its psychology roots if it doesn't want to keep being known as nothing more than an insurance policy.

The game of football itself has generally been able to tap into the fan psychology factor pretty easily. But the thrill of competitiveness and violence ends where bureaucracy begins. In a way the NFL has become another branch of government especially when you take a closer look at those taxpayer based stadium deals they find a way to work out with local legislation. The negative value of all these shady deals and policies are starting to add up though. Before football executives never had to worry because public relations never really affected their bottom line, but now it is. Their PR has gotten so bad that some fans would rather not watch their favorite sport than support the NFL. The New York Times just published a piece on that very theory by releasing the article, *Women's Views on N.F.L. Dim in Wake of Domestic Violence Cases*. In the story, the author features a long-time Chicago fan's perspective on the matter by saying, “‘Before this week I held the N.F.L. in a different view,’ Ms. Larvick said as she waited for her children outside an elementary school on Chicago's North Side. ‘It seemed different — like families and communities were important to them. But I know it's just a business now.’” And

like any other business, people can stop purchasing their product. The same organization that theoretically took away Sunday from the church is now feeling a little bit less immortal. That is why athletes and franchises worldwide need to revolutionize their current PR tactics. Simple politics isn't going to work anymore, long term psychology strategies are the only way to build success that won't be knocked down by any random scandal.

While maintaining a positive relationship overtime may sound difficult and complicated, we can start mapping out guidelines through the process of elimination. Through our case studies so far, we know cover ups don't work. You can't cover up people's opinions, the truth will come out eventually (just ask Baylor...). Negligence also doesn't work as the internet and media have a hard time forgetting things. I know these may sound like obvious errors, but just keep in mind that the "best" PR teams money can buy made these same mistakes within the past couple years. Another tactic we have examined were public apologies. We now know that you must follow up your apology with community action or else the general public will never give you a chance to earn your reputation back (i.e. Michael Vick vs. Greg Hardy). We explored the "stand your ground" tactic with the Tom Brady's and Donald Trump's of the world. While this was, more or less, a grey area, we learned that you can have success with this technique as long as you play your cards right. In certain situations, being the rebel or "bad boy" can actually increase your success. It can make your loyal fan base support you even more and show that you have character. This usually only works in the realm of competition and non-violent circumstances though. Similar to being a "bad boy," being funny also helps. Making light of the situation and your mistakes can often relieve the pressure surrounding the scandal or highlight the ridiculousness of it. Again, though, usually only works in non-violent circumstances (i.e. you can't make a joke about sexual assault). So where do examining all these case studies and tactics leave us? Well from those guidelines we laid out, we can almost make out a public relations' equation for success.

$$\mathbf{S + A + (\pm R) + (\pm H) * (CS) = SPRR}$$

Sincerity + Action + (\pm Rebellious) + (\pm Humorous) * (Continued Success) = Successful Public Relations Response

It may sound a little clichè, but surprisingly that equation covers proven fan psychology and eliminates most of the common PR mistakes...thus setting an athlete/organization up for long term public relations success. The Sincerity variable eliminates any lies or cover up attempts that someone may be persuaded into doing. The Action variable reminds us that negligence doesn't

work and that you have to address your problem to move on from it. It also reminds you that baseless apologies don't work and people want to see action. That includes community service, donations, and concrete policy changes. The Rebellious and Humorous variable capture fan psychology and are designed for character building. This helps especially with public personalities and brand identity. These character traits help one figure out the tone of their response. They can either confidently stick to their arguments or make light of the situation with humor. I put a plus/minus symbol before them, since those factors are a grey area and should be addressed to scale with the specifics of a situation. The last variable is the idea of Continued Success. The athlete or organization needs to have continued success within their respected field. People naturally want to move on and not see the problem define you. As a person who hates the Patriots, it was still really impressive to see Tom Brady literally shut down his deflategate critics by going out and winning the Superbowl. Especially in sports, people love hearing the comeback story (whether in the game or in life). Now, the greatest part about the whole equation is that it can adapt with time and changing ideologies. Overtime we can add/replace variables that address changing attitudes or variables that eliminate new bad PR tactics. If one truly incorporates all those factors and others that are deemed necessary for a positive public relations response, then there is no way there can be failure. The degree of success will depend on the specific situation, but, all and all, you will be on the right track to improved public relations.

Some may view that equation as simple or naive, but it provides a model in which we can address the vague world of public relations more scientifically. A readjusting equation that creates a mold of character traits the public positively identifies with, which therefore eliminates the PR strategies that don't fall in line with that. This helps the industry gain some consistency and allow preparation for the random controversy. Public relations should be a science, not just some political tactic when nothing else is working. The psychology behind how the masses think should not be undervalued, but unfortunately is considering how current PR is performed.

Expert Analysis

“Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Arthur Solomon graciously took time for an interview to offer his analysis on my thesis and the current industry/practices of PR. Arthur Solomon was a Senior Vice President and 25

year veteran at the international communications firm Burson-Marsteller. He has been a key player for some of the biggest companies in their respective fields like General Electric, Raycom Sports, Warner Bros, Gillette, Metropolitan Life, Coca-Cola, and the U.S. Army. Specifically related to the sports industry, he traveled internationally as an advisor with ranking government officials and executives of the Seoul Olympic and Asian Games Organizing Committees and the State of Victoria (Australia). Also, for eight years, he managed the Gillette All-Star Game election publicity program during the era when Gillette was the sole sponsor of the fan balloting for baseball's mid-summer classic. On top of that, early in his career he was a journalist writing for the New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, and the Associated Press. Arthur Solomon was the perfect person to analyze the industry as he is extremely knowledgeable on both sides of the arena, due to his experience once as a journalist and now as a PR strategist. His associations with multiple industries other than sports like corporate business and politics also gives a broad unbiased perspective of the industry as a whole.

During the interview, I asked him if he thought bad PR practices are making the industry seem inconsistent with its ability to find effective solutions. Mr. Solomon responded, "That's a question that can be interpreted many ways. I don't believe there is a single answer to that question because I am a firm believer that each situation in a PR crisis deserves original thinking. But I feel that too often responses are from tenets that were devised decades ago and should be discarded. Just falling back on "book" strategies is what I consider a bad PR practice." He was firm in his belief that each crisis requires original thinking and he sees far too many companies/individuals using outdated textbook strategies. While, I think there needs to be a standard PR equation, this still falls in line with my solution because the scientific aspects of the equation would be interchangeable with the specific company and situations. The method would just be a template for the crisis' current status, while still preventing overused textbook-style strategies like falsifying information, baseless apology statements, ignoring the issue, and reverting blame. Solomon also provided me with articles he has previously published that address the practices he believes should be avoided and his personal solutions to them. In multiple articles, he mentioned some of the same case studies I have analyzed as evidence on tactics that simply don't work and usually only make the situation worse. Solomon wrote, "Prime examples of making a PR crisis worse was the handling by the National Football League of its concussions issue, the tobacco industry executives swearing that they didn't know that their

products could cause devastating illness, BP's handling of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and Penn State's reaction to its child molestation problems. They all could provide semester-long courses in how not to handle a PR crisis." While almost everyone inside and outside the industry agree that these strategies should have been discontinued a long time ago, somehow they keep popping up during some of the biggest scandals. In my opinion, this not only calls for a revolution on how we practice PR as a whole, but should result in some changes in policy like fines/suspensions from the government. Until then, they will remain a grey area and will continue to be used from people scaling all the way up to our current president. Solomon was even able to use recent Trump administration strategies of what not to do when conducting successful PR. Below are a couple of examples he provided:

- **Tell the truth:** Trump administration cohorts originally denying contacts with Russians, and Trump's accusatory unproved tweets, led to Congressional investigating committees and continuing negative news coverage.
- **Don't act rash:** Trump's constant tweets about the Russian allegations having no substance and being politically motivated exacerbated the situation by generating additional media coverage.
- **Limit replies to media stories:** Attacking media coverage led to the media defending its coverage, resulting in additional stories rehashing the allegations.
- **Avoid the drip-by- drip method:** After much denying contacts with Russians during and after the election, Trump associates admitted, one-by- one, that they had contacts with the Russians. Being truthful from the beginning would have avoided the appearance of a cover-up.
- **Don't have a press spokesperson who is antagonistic when asked media questions he doesn't like:** Instead of calmly disagreeing, Trump press secretary Sean Spicer too often attacks questioners for having an "agenda." Personally attacking a reporter should be avoided. It accomplishes nothing and leads to a "you-against- me" atmosphere.
- **When answering a reporter's question, don't give an answer that can be proven wrong:** Spicer insisted numerous times that both Democratic and Republican officials said there was no collusion between the Trump administration and Russia, resulting in NBC's Chuck Todd to proclaim on March 28 that the investigation is still on-going.

As comically hypocritical as some of those scenarios were for the President, they prove that there is no decline in negative PR methods that were debunked decades ago dating back to the Nixon era. So there is either a miscommunication on effective crisis communication or a complete disregard for public perception. Both of which I have proved can be devastating to

future profits and social justice during a large scandal. As one can see though, many of these rules also align with my analysis for effective crisis communications like sincerity, thought-out decision making, and a non-antagonistic approach.

Mr. Solomon then provided me with a more advanced PR checklist similar to *The Checklist Manifesto* by Atul Gawande. A checklist to use during a crisis as to not create any missteps that would further the controversy. The original checklist has 23 steps, but I narrowed it down to 10 that are specific to the thesis.

- **Treat your PR rep as if they were your corporate attorney. Tell them everything.**
- **Make certain that your PR rep is in constant contact with your attorney.**
- **Include your PR rep in all strategy sessions.**
- **Never try to hide a problem or hope it'll go away. Try to solve it before it mushrooms into a crisis situation.**
- **When speaking to the media, always tell the complete truth. It'll come out anyway.**
- **Don't hide your CEO. He should appear at the initial press conference and also at subsequent ones when significant news will be released.**
- **Always have a prepared statement for media distribution at the press conference.**
- **Just as you should have a crisis communication plan and team in place, you should also have a "prepare the damage" team.**
- **Don't play the blame game. It only provides additional ammunition for reporters.**
- **Study the actions of Presidents Bush and Obama and the Commissioners of Major League Baseball and the National Football League. That will provide a post graduate education on how not to act during a crisis.**

The first 3 checks address my concern of executives making bold PR decisions without effectively including the advice of their PR team. Also, athletes/franchises trying to hide the problem or playing the blame game was another critical aspect that I thought needs to be addressed more within sports. Notable checks that I would add to my policy changes are not hiding your CEO and having a “prepare the damage” team, Not hiding your CEO is more personable and a strategy that is easier to believe than a simple written statement, while a “prepare the damage” team helps you address any controversial matters that are going to come out anyways.

This expert analysis was extremely beneficial in not only proving many of my arguments, but also learning from an expert that has worked in the industry from many different angles. I greatly appreciate Arthur Solomon taking the time to collaborate with my analysis of the industry and provide his experience/knowledge to help me better my suggested changes in policy.

Conclusion

The amount of case studies I have provided are only a small fraction of the negative backlash athletes and organizations have received for their crisis communication response. Still, everyone has an opinion on this issue. One cannot deny though the decline in PR’s reputation and the looming consensus that it is an unnecessary luxury. When the PR industry needs its own PR team is where strategists should draw the line. In my opinion, it will take a revolution that might even require governmental policy changes for the continuation of corrupt practices. I have also provided a solution that I believe would adequately address the situation if seriously implemented into every crisis communication process. Whether you believe that or not is up to you, but when the president of the free world frequently engages in these almost George Orwell style PR responses, you know changes are coming...

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