

Public relations evaluation in sport: Views from the field

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Abstract 208**

Assessing the effectiveness of the public relations function has long been a challenge for organizations, but it is now being viewed as increasingly important as management teams continue to emphasize accountability (Hon, 1998; Lindenman, 2006; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault & Agee, 2005). Public relations scholars note that evaluation methods range in complexity from guesses based on the best information available to advanced measurements of attitudinal and behavioral changes among key publics (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault & Agee, 2005). Unfortunately, the former methods are all too common ((Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002), and they offer little evidence regarding how public relations contributes to the attainment of organizational goals.

As a result, the public relations function has commonly been marginalized, particularly within the sport industry. In their seminal work on public relations models, Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified the sport industry as one of the common settings in which the most basic model of public relations i.e., the publicity model) was predominant. McCleneghan (1995) noted that many college sports information professionals reported concerns about lack of respect for their work among senior-level athletic officials, and Stoldt (2000) found that even senior-level college sport media relations personnel reported functioning as technicians more often than as managers. More recently, L'Etang (2006) identified "the need for more sophisticated approaches to be taken by sport organizations" (p. 246) in regard to public relations. Specifically, L'Etang (2006) called for a greater emphasis in teaching and research on public relations and reputation management, issues management, and evaluation.

The purpose of this project is to describe how public relations evaluation is conducted within the sport industry. The model for this project was a study conducted by Hon (1998), although this project differs from Hon's in scope and in its method of data collection. Though too limited to be generalized, the study is of significance since it will provide a description of current practices in diverse sport settings and may serve as the impetus for the prescription and development of more advanced practices in the field.

Data was gathered via a survey of public relations practitioners in varied settings within the sport industry. A non-probability sample of approximately 35 subjects was secured via personal solicitation for the project. Roughly half of those participants were sport public relations professionals with whom the investigators had existing relationships. The rest were public relations professionals recommended by other sport managers (e.g., a general manager recommending the public relations director in her/his organization). A dimensional element to the sampling technique was also utilized as the investigators included subjects from multiple sectors of the field (e.g., major-level professional sports, minor-level professional sports, sport venues, fitness service providers). Accordingly, respondents dealt with publics ranging from, but not limited to, the media to donors to organizational members to the general community.

The survey instrument contained a number of open-ended questions, three of which pertain to this presentation. They were:

1. What do you and other sport managers consider to be the main goals for public relations in your organization?
2. What do you and other sport managers think is the link between goals for public relations and goals for your organization?
3. How do you and other sport managers in your organization evaluate the effectiveness of public relations?

Data generated by the responses were analyzed by two investigators using the data coding procedures recommended by Gratton and Jones (2004). In addition, the investigators conducted several member checks that included select survey respondents and two other individuals in the sport public relations profession (Hon, 1998).

Preliminary results indicated that generating public awareness of the organization and building a positive image for the organization were the most common goals for public relations. These were most commonly achieved via publicity efforts. The most commonly reported link between goals for public relations and goals for the organization is the perceived positive impact of the public relations outcomes (i.e., awareness and positive image) on the behavior of key publics such as ticket buyers, sponsors, member institutions and participants within the organization. The most commonly reported method of evaluation, based on preliminary results, was media placement, though a number of respondents also cited monitoring traffic on their organization's Web site. Several respondents reported instances in which public relations tracking mechanisms were connected to organizational goal assessments (e.g., source of information regarding ticket sales).

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Based on these results, it would seem that sport public relations professionals commonly fall in the middle when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of their programs. Within this sample, they neither rely on best guesses given the information at hand nor advanced measures of outcomes among key publics. It is debatable, however, whether tracking mechanisms such as media placement rates and Web site usage necessarily correlate with commonly stated public relations goals such as building awareness or crafting a positive image. Further, strengthening linkages between public relations measurements and organizational goals continues to be a challenge for practitioners.

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