

The Pearl Factor: A case study of how one collegiate coach makes an impact through public relations.

Brody J. Ruibley, University of Tennessee

Angela N. Pratt, University of Tennessee

Eric Haley (Advisor), University of Tennessee

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In today's intercollegiate athletics environment, coaches are expanding their expertise beyond the sidelines. Wins and losses are not the only focus of a collegiate coach if he or she desires to be successful in a big time program. Not only do coaches have to recruit, watch film, practice, compete, and provide guidance to student athletes, they are also becoming more involved in public relations, marketing, and other activities that support their athletics department and university.

Bruce Pearl is a men's collegiate head basketball coach who actively incorporates the aforementioned activities into his work. Since Pearl's arrival at the University of Tennessee in 2005, his colleagues, fans, media, and sales and fundraising numbers attest that he has energized the men's basketball program, the athletics department, Tennessee men's basketball fans, and the university community. The purpose of this case study is to show how Pearl perceives his role as head coach, particularly in regards to marketing and promoting the University of Tennessee men's basketball program, men's athletics department and institution, and to examine how other members of Pearl's current athletics department and university administration perceive and support his role. To understand the realities of Pearl's role as men's head basketball coach at the University of Tennessee, it is important to gain understanding directly from Pearl himself, as well as his closest colleagues in athletics and university administration. Therefore, the researchers conducted long interviews with Pearl, men's athletics director Mike Hamilton, athletics public relations director Tiffany Carpenter, athletics marketing director Chris Fuller and university public relations director Tom Milligan.

This study was conducted in a manner consistent with constructivism, a philosophy of inquiry that affirms realities as multiple and socially constructed, as well as context dependent (Guba, 1990). While prior research is useful to explain the context of this study and provide sensitizing concepts (McCracken, 1988), it is not used to predict responses. To do so would risk concealing the life-worlds of participants under a theory "mask," as Gurwitsch suggested (1974, p. 17). Therefore, the researchers used studies regarding coaching and public relations not to provide a foundation to build on, but to suggest categories found in the past, provide some areas for discussion and aid in understanding (McCracken, 1988). The researchers transcribed and conducted a member check for each interview. Then, the researchers analyzed the transcripts for categories and themes to find shared meanings. The results consist of the following grouped categories and themes: relationship orientation (communication, connection, personal relationships, and planning and preparation); tangible outcomes (growth and development, marketing, revenue, new initiatives, community relations, exposure for other teams, and on-court success); and supporting and core values (pride and tradition, trust and respect, commitment, and core mission).

This case study provides researchers with more evidence of the impact of public relations in collegiate athletics departments and sport organizations in general, even through "non-traditional" positions such as head coaches. In addition, some findings relate to concepts from other studies in public relations and marketing, such as integrated marketing communication, multiple communication approaches to diverse audiences, credible spokespersons, outcomes-based evaluation of public relations effectiveness, and relationship management. From an industry perspective, this case study provides an example of how head coaches can impact their programs, athletics departments and university communities through public relations activities.