Public Relations Strategies of the Chinese Professional Baseball League in the 2009 Game-fixing Scandal

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Poster

Baseball has been regarded as the national sport of Taiwan for its glory it brought to the people (Hu & Tsai, 2008). When the tie between Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Government and the Carter authority was broken, it was baseball that gave Taiwanese a reason to hold their pride. In 1990, baseball became Taiwan's first professional team sport (the Chinese Professional Baseball League, CPBL), drawing attention from people of all ages. However, similar to what happened in the baseball histories of United States and Japan, the development of the CPBL was hindered by a number of issues, including controversies with the former Taiwan Major League, withdrawing of clubs, disturbances in broadcasting right, and numerous game-fixing accusations and charges (Kao, 2001; Tsai, 2003; Yeh, 2008).

Studies have shown public relations practitioners usually seek to attract interests from the public, to enhance credibility of the league, and to improve players’ professional reputation (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Rhee, 2004). To deal with the unfavorable circumstances, the CPBL put forth a variety of public relations efforts, including creating a sound league image, making good use of media coverage, lobbying for institution and legislation changes, clearing communication channels, and taking parts in charity and social services (Lin, 2009; Tseng, 2003; Yeh, 2008). However, due to the dissatisfactory salary structure, unfairness of contract terms, and lacking of effective gambling monitoring approaches, game-fixing scandals continue to find their way into Taiwan’s baseball stadia (Wapedia, 2010).

Match-fixing scandals are indeed significant threats to the integrity of sports (Hosmer-Henner, 2010). They can devastate the legitimacy of baseball being a “sport” rather than an “entertainment” that carries predictable outcome (McLaren, 2008). In 2009, Taiwan’s baseball fans astounding found out that many of their heroes intentionally lost the game in exchange for payoffs. As the scandal is not only the biggest but also the league’s fifth game-fixing case since its establishment 20 years ago, it strikes hard on Taiwan’s already fragile pro baseball. Even though the country’s leader promises that the authority will give full support, including a $3 million promotional fund, to ensure an environment free from game-fixing and gangster threats (Sports Affairs Council, 2009), the attendance and TV rating of CPBL have dropped considerably without knowing when or if they are ever to rise again.

Scholars indicate crisis management begins with recognizing the presence of the crisis, coming up with proper solutions, and putting an end to the crisis (Coombs, 2002; Wu, 2006). It is worthwhile to know how the CPBL considers the impact of the scandal and if crisis management practices have been implemented. Also, in crises, public relations practitioners are advised to promptly set strategies, form a special task force, monitor the aftermath, and communicate to the public to save organization’s image (Chen, 2009). As the corruption probe reaches a critical stage and more players being prosecuted (Adams, 2010), the study intended to find out what, if any, has been done to minimize the damage of the scandal.

The study used a secondary-data analysis method and telephone interviews to examine the proposed questions. Secondary data of the study included information, comments and actions revealed or taken by the CPBL and its clubs announced by press media, electronic media and official web sites of the CPBL and its clubs from October 27, 2009 to October 30, 2010. A total of 807 pieces of the 2009 scandal related news reports and messages were collected and analyzed. With regard to the telephone interviews, the researchers made phone calls to 3 officials and 1 booster club member form the 4 CPBL clubs (Brother Elephant, Sinon Bulls, Uni-lions and La New Bears) to find out public relations strategies put forth in dealing with the scandal, and, in some cases, to verify the authenticity of media reports.

Of the collected 807 pieces of game-fixing relevant news and messages, 772 (96%) were newspaper reports, 13 (2%) were from weekly magazines, and 22 (3%) were from the CPBL official web sites. An examination of the contents of these data found that 301 (37.3%) were about prosecution actions, 112 (13.9%) pieces describing comments of the CPBL clubs, 37 (4.6%) were news releases from the league, 8 (1%) were players’ union announcements, and the rest 349 (43.2%) were concerns from the media and the general public. Hence, only 149 (18.5%) of the total data were considered as public relations moves dealing with the 2009 game-fixing scandal of the CPBL and its clubs. The researchers further categorized information revealed in the 149 pieces of data into six types of public relations strategies, namely, “Rebuilding Organization’s Image” (n = 32), “Controlling Damage
Within the most applied “Controlling Damage Effects” strategy, the CPBL clubs officially apologized for the players’ poor behaviors and asked for forgiveness and continuing support for the innocent players. They also promised full cooperation with the prosecution authority while appealing for fair judgment for every accused player. Lawsuits were filed against players who plead guilty for indemnity as the clubs regarded themselves as victims of the scandal. As indicated in the secondary data and interviews, some considerations were deliberated as better ways to rebuild the league’s image. For instance, news conferences were held to state the clubs’ stance to maintain a close and trustworthy relationship with their constituencies. Another example was to request sponsors and contractors to intensify their cooperation with the clubs’ public relations projects to show a still favorable business atmosphere. Due to many players’ being suspended or expelled from the league, restructuring of the clubs including recruitment of new players and reassignment of administrative personnel were also deemed necessary. It was hoped that new faces will help make unpleasant memory fade away. In proposing legislation enactments, requests voiced by the league basically consisted of two parts: fraud elimination and profit expansion. More precisely, they recommended five initiatives: to increase baseball teams at the three amateur levels to enlarge the pool of talented players; to forbid sentenced players from entering amateur baseball teams; to establish an anti-game-fixing mechanism coordinating efforts of the league, police and prosecution; to amend existing laws to allow an increase in pension fund deposit for the players and a tax waive on player’s retirement incomes; and, to permit 100% tax reduction for specific expenditures for the CPBL clubs.

As compared to the total data collected in the study, statements or responses from the CPBL appeared to be less noticeable. Whereas official websites have been frequently used by organizations to promote images and communicate with their stakeholders (Yeh, 2008), the website usage for the CPBL was somewhat low. The three most frequently employed strategies identified in this study were more reactive in nature. They fell short to show the strategic aspects of a crisis management plan (i.e. Wu, 2006). Instead, it seems that the league and clubs were mostly interested in claiming their opposition to the misdeed by quickly alienating problem players. To maintain a low position and wait for the turmoil to end obviously has been the core principle adapted by the CPBL.