

Crisis in Sports: How to Handle a Crisis as a PR Professional

On June 12, 2008, NBA commissioner David Stern addressed the media during a press conference regarding former referee Tom Donaghy's claims that two "company men" made sure the 2002 Western Conference finals reached a game seven (Stein, 2008). In a letter filed to a U.S. district judge, Donaghy accused referees of fixing games and of not making certain kinds of calls on the star players to meet the best business interests of the league. Donaghy has pleaded guilty for conspiring with gamblers and currently faces up to 25 years in prison and a \$500,000 fine (Beck, 2008).

The Tom Donaghy case first surfaced in July 2007 and as the NBA nears its one-year anniversary, the league's image remains a problem. In fact, a recent survey conducted by *Advertising Age* found that 37% of NBA fans believed that the league "somewhat or very likely alters the outcomes of its games" (Bush, 2008). This poll was conducted before the most recent developments in the Donaghy case and thus it highlights the lack of credibility the NBA has with its fans. If that wasn't bad enough, a poll conducted by *ESPN the Magazine* found that "60% of sports fans say the game isn't as pure as it once was" (Palmer, 2008). The NBA is a league in desperate need of an image makeover to earn back favor with its fans.

In late July 2007, Stern addressed a crowd of reporters at a news conference to respond to the accusations that Donaghy conspired with gamblers, which came out through an FBI investigation (Sheridan, 2007). During this 70-minute long press conference, Stern spoke of the precautions they already had in place to prevent cheating

and betting as well as how the NBA planned to step forward with this situation. Stern also commented on what he could and could not discuss because of the ongoing FBI investigation (Stern, 2007). Many public relations professionals argue that early, honest, and open communication is best because it helps to decrease risk. By responding quickly to the situation, you can get your viewpoint out to the media before the public reaches a public opinion verdict (Barker, 2007). Once the public has formed its opinion, it becomes hard to change that opinion even when new information emerges. Stern responded to the allegation within four days of the story breaking. While it would have been ideal to have responded even quicker, Stern had to discuss with both legal counsel and the FBI on which matters could and could not be discussed in the news conference (Stern, 2007).

While you don't want to break the bad news unless it is of a very serious situation, which requires you to inform reporters of the situation, it is important to respond swiftly and to do so in an honest manner. Sports PR professionals need to be open and honest with the media regarding the crisis situation for a variety of reasons. First, one little lie discovered by the media can blow up into a larger fiasco and can result in both the fans and media losing trust in you likely resulting in an even more negative image for the team or league that you help represent. Consistency is key if you want to garner any credibility with your fans, the media, and management. Second, sharing information and being honest about the crisis "communicates your organization's integrity and your drive to comply" (Domingo, 2003). Openness regarding the situation demonstrates to fans that you are not hiding any information. According to Stern, he could not be more upfront about specifics of the Donaghy allegations because the FBI investigation was still ongoing. But by holding a press conference and explaining what he

did know and could comment on, it showed the fans how distraught he was over this allegation and that he was taking the matter very seriously. In addition to showing that you are not hiding anything, news conferences “help satiate your publics’ curiosities, and help you subdue unsubstantiated rumors” (Domingo, 2003). Stern did not want to address these Donaghy allegations until after the completion of the FBI investigation.

Unfortunately for Stern, word got out and he had to hold a press conference to right some incorrect speculations that the NBA knew about Donaghy’s betting and allowed him to continue to referee games anyways (Stern, 2007). All in all, Stern did a solid job in addressing the media during that press conference because he tried to be as transparent as possible regarding the situation, showed remorse for the situation, and promised to do whatever it took to right this crisis.

Stern’s response helped soothe the fans that felt betrayed until the most recent allegations made by Donaghy himself appeared on the media horizon. With the first incident, fans could blame Donaghy for conspiring to gamble and forgive the NBA for the most part. However when Donaghy accused other referees of fixing games including two playoff games, it became much harder for the fans to simply blame the one referee and instead look to the common denominator, the NBA. According to the *PR News*, “experimental studies have documented that letting the same bad thing happen more than once leads to even greater blame and reputational threat” (Ovaitt, 2008). Fans no longer perceive Donaghy as being the only dirty referee. Now, there is a perception that there are multiple dirty referees even if the source of this speculation is Donaghy himself. Even if it is not true that there was only one dirty referee, the NBA needs to combat the fan’s perception heads on. Ted Marzilli, senior VP-general manager of the brand group at

YouGovPolimetrix, states that the NBA needs “to take some action by implementing some rules and be visible about it” and “acknowledge there is the perception of an issue, that there may actually be an issue and that you are going to do everything you can to ensure there is a trust between fans and the NBA" (Bush, 2008). This time around, Stern’s press conference did not really help ease the concerns held by fans about the image of the league. In fact, Stern spent more time attacking Donaghy than he did actually addressing steps that the league is taking to ensure that dirty refereeing is only a thing of the past (Stern, 2008). The jury of public opinion remains out on the NBA and its image crisis.

Teams and leagues need to be prepared for a crisis at all times because the odds are that you as a sports PR professional will have to deal with one. Crisis has been a common problem in sport since the beginning. In fact, the MLB’s PR department was established after the Black Sox Scandal in 1919 in an effort to improve the public’s perception of the league (Oakes, 2006). The odds appear high for a crisis to occur when “40% of players in the NBA and 21% of players in the NFL have been charged with a crime” (Oakes, 2006). Whether it’s the threat of a terrorist attack, natural disaster, trading away of a hometown favorite, life-threatening player injury, sale of a team, or conspiring to gamble on NBA games, sports PR professionals have to create a plan of attack in case of a crisis because there can be very little time to adjust once the situation occurs. One can help to prepare for future moments of crisis by reviewing past situations and how they were resolved, whether it was effective or not (Domingo, 2003). By knowing how other organizations have handled crisis, your team or league can learn from their mistakes and practice what worked. Between creating a crisis management plan before an incident

actually occurs and then following the wise guidelines of PR professionals who have been through it before, any sports PR professional should feel comfortable dealing with fans, media, players, and management in the face of a crisis.

Impact of Blogging on Sports

In today's sports hungry world, sports PR practitioners must be aware of not only what the media is saying about their players, team, or league, but also what social media is saying as well. Whether it's an inappropriate picture found on Facebook, a YouTube clip of a drunken athlete, or a negative blog post that gains traction throughout the sports blogosphere, social media has the power to taint and even damage the reputation of star athletes and organizations. Any of these social media websites could turn a little slip-up into a full-blown crisis so it's important to have your finger on the pulse of these sites. Unfortunately, some organizations choose to ignore this world altogether until they are forced to come to grips with it because some crisis came up. When a PR professional needs to always be prepared, it's important to know what is being said about your client whether it's on a message board, blog, or even Twitter.

Technically savvy teams like the Washington Capitals, which is owned by AOL Vice Chairman Emeritus Ted Leonsis, have worked with top hockey bloggers to develop a blogging policy. Admittedly, the Capitals are looking to garner more coverage of their team as they don't earn as many column inches as they'd like in the *Washington Post* and other print media. Even so, their media relations staff has realized the importance of reaching out to the bloggers that abide by the blogging policy.

“Thanks to this [blogging] community, we can spread the word about Capitals hockey in ways that aren’t possible in the conventional media. That could mean a lengthy post about our team’s performance in a particular game – in the paper you’ll get a game story, sure, but you might not see the analysis that some of our bloggers will share. It could also take the form of a post highlighting our recent blood drive, for example – something that may get passing mention in the Post or Times, but can get more space, and more attention, on the web,” Leonsis wrote on the Capitals’ website (Leonsis, 2007).

The NHL is arguably the most open league in terms of credentialing bloggers as 24 covered the 2008 Stanley Cup Finals (Sweet, 2008). The New York Islanders tested a new concept this past season by creating a Blog Box for bloggers to sit in during games. Afterwards, they could interview select players and coaching personnel following the game depending on availability (Witt, 2007). While some of the more serious hockey bloggers saw it as demeaning, the Blog Box was a way for the NYI to get more exposure in the unconventional media outlet and reach out to their fans.

Other interactions between bloggers and the covered team or league did not go so well. The following two examples actually involved bloggers for established newspapers and the team or league. First, the NCAA revoked a *Louisville Courier-Journal* sports reporter’s press pass after they found him live-blogging an NCAA super-regional baseball game. The NCAA argued that this live-blogging violated “its policies prohibiting live Internet updates from its championship events” (Bozich, 2007). The NCAA later implemented an updated blogging policy, but it still discourages bloggers and reporters from live-blogging the game. A separate incident involving the Dallas

Mavericks also caused quite a storm in both the blogosphere and the mass media regarding the team's policy toward bloggers. Mark Cuban, owner of the Mavs, decided to ban all bloggers from the locker room including those who were blogging for well-respected print newspapers. After the NBA made Cuban get rid of that policy one month later, Cuban opened the locker room to all bloggers – the Joes and Pros as he called it. Cuban himself would read writing samples of the interested bloggers and decide who would and would not be able to get locker room access (Cuban, 2008). Neither of these incidences reflected well on the parties involved, which highlights the importance of understanding social media influences and the impact it can have on your organization's reputation.

Not only has sports blogging impacted the media policies held by teams towards the nontraditional media, sports blogging has also impacted how the teams cover themselves and how the media covers the team. Before the NHL lockout, many teams' websites were infrequently updated and lacked any continuity from one team's website to the next. Following the lockout, the NHL implemented a uniform website design for all 30 teams and required the development of a new media department within each organization. As such, each website now has video clips from practice, postgame interviews, and other quirky video features. The team websites also showcase game recaps and solid news and feature articles similar to what one would find in a newspaper. Some teams like the Detroit Red Wings have even created message boards and a blog to further their interaction with the fans and try to keep pace in this social media world.

Newspaper beat reporters have been impacted as well by sports blogging and the decline in print circulation. On top of writing their daily articles about the team, the

reporter must also blog any breaking news or interesting tidbits that would not normally make it into an article found in the paper's print edition. As circulations shrink and the number of job layoffs rise, these beat reporters face increasing responsibility for the content they must produce throughout the day. Reporters no longer have to just compete with their city's other daily or even the other mass media outlets across the country for a breaking story, but they have to compete with the sports blogosphere as well. I have seen first hand a table of reporters receive a press release announcing the contract extension of a player. A couple of the more veteran reporters who didn't really blog just discussed the signing over their meal while two of the younger beat reporters raced to their laptops along the wall and began furiously typing on their computers. It became a race to see who could get their blog post up first because whoever got it up first with the most information would typically receive the most hits from the sports blogs linking to the breaking news story. The demand placed on these reporters to succeed in a traditional media outlet while competing against those in the mass media as well as the nontraditional outlets is unbelievable. I truly believe the reporter who only writes for the print edition is quickly becoming a dying breed thanks to the impact of blogging and other social media.

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