



Full Length Article

Preventing damage: The psychology of crisis communication buffers in organized sports



Duncan Koerber^{a,*}, Nick Zabara^b

^a School of Professional Communication, Ryerson University, Canada

^b Clinical Psychology, University of Waterloo, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Sports crisis communication is a growing field of study, with research focusing on the image repair of athletes and teams, fan solidarity during crises, and the role of mass and new media in crisis development. However, reflecting a broader tendency in crisis communication to emphasize the study of response strategies at the expense of other factors, sports crisis communication research has not examined the unique factors in sports that prevent crises from causing severe image and reputation damage. In this paper, we apply Coombs' notion of buffers to argue for new attention to two particularly important buffers in sports: communities and political economy. These buffers often preclude the need for any response at all, and crisis communication practitioners would do well to implement them around their own sports teams to prevent damage from crises.

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1. Introduction

A growing area of public relations and crisis communication research examines organized collegiate and professional sports. Predominant in this research are studies of the image repair of athletes and teams, fan solidarity during crises, and the role of mass and new media in crisis development (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2012; Brazeal, 2008; Brown, 2016; Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2013; Compton & Compton, 2014).

Factors unique to the field complicate crisis communication in organized sports. Unlike retail customers in a simple relationship with a store, sports fans buy tickets to gain access to an exciting public drama—a drama not found with most other products or services. Sports fans are engaged daily in on- and off-line communities around sports, and sports leagues often have a monopoly in these communities. The many prominent actors involved—from owners to coaches to players—further complicate the sports crisis communication analysis (it is rare in the business world to have groups of employees who are public stars, for example). The level of engagement fans have with these actors means that sports crises have the potential to strike deeply at the heart of the relationship between fans, teams, and players.

An assumption in the study of crisis communication generally and sports crisis communication specifically is that without effective strategic communication during the response stage, a crisis will cause immediate and serious damage to the reputations and images of the individuals and organizations involved. In the case of sports teams, the connection between

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dkoerber@ryerson.ca (D. Koerber).

the fan and team could be irreparably harmed. This assumption underlies a major vein of crisis communication research that tests response strategies such as denial, apology, and corrective action to find the best ones for each specific crisis situation or type of crisis (Coombs, 2004; p. 270). Applied to sports, these tests and case studies have praised apology as an important damage-limiting strategy (Brazeal, 2008; Brown, 2016).

A subset of this research—found in Situational Crisis Communication Theory and of particular importance to this paper—takes a step back from focusing on which strategy to choose and considers what pre-existing factors could influence the management of a crisis. Coombs calls these pre-existing conditions “buffers.” As the name implies, a buffer may come between the crisis and the team’s or athlete’s reputation and image, limiting damage. Coombs primarily describes two buffers: crisis history and a favourable reputation with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; p. 165; Coombs, 2014; p. 154).

An organization with no crisis history faces less attribution of blame from stakeholders during a crisis, limiting the image or reputation damage of a single crisis. If the crisis represents a pattern, attributions of blame increase, damaging the public image and alienating stakeholders. The second buffer, a favourable reputation, develops “by meeting and exceeding stakeholder expectations” (Coombs, 2014; p. 35). A favourable reputation already in place at the time of a crisis can be a “buffer against the reputational capital lost during a crisis” (Coombs, 2007; p. 165). For Coombs, this buffer prevents stakeholders who already think highly of the organization from assuming the worst when a crisis occurs (2014; p. 154). They may even attack the source of the crisis message, such as an accuser or whistleblower, in a form of solidarity with the organization or the individuals within it.

As with Coombs’ two types, the concept of a buffer represents any factor that comes between an organization and its stakeholders in times of crises—a mediator of sorts. It is a useful idea for crisis communication researchers because it necessarily complicates the process of selecting a crisis communication response strategy, whether responding in the fields of business, politics, or sports. Without giving thought to buffers, crisis response strategy theory risks becoming a rote act of moving directly to response decisions. However, not all crises have a clear chain of causality among events, not all will cause damage, and not all require immediate or extensive response strategies. All of these factors may vary due to the protective effect of buffers.

Buffers have not been given much consideration, however, in research on sports public relations, a point exemplified by the two most significant sports public relations textbooks in print today. In *Sports Public Relations: Managing Stakeholder Communication*, Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2012) present a broad look at the field, with a chapter on sports crisis communication. In the book, they do touch on community relations and note that stakeholder relationships should be “nurtured” (p. 30). The act of community relations, they note, is about “establishing and enhancing relationships with various publics” (p. 218). Nonetheless, there is no connection in the book between these goals and crisis communication. In the textbook *Sports Public Relations*, L’Etang touches on crisis communication. The book does consider a community perspective through social construction/cultural studies theories. As well, it discusses crises as damaging to athletes’ and teams’ reputations. It even hints at buffers when relating a story about the fan following of Manchester United football star Wayne Rooney. L’Etang writes that “outstanding sports stars may accrue at least some immunity” from reputation damage thanks to fan community support, although she does not expand on this or develop any theory (2013, p. 29). Both books, which mostly consider crisis communication from the perspective of the response stage, need more attention to the theory of crisis buffers.

With that in mind, we argue that sports crisis communicators must consider what comes between the crisis and its effects on stakeholders (clients, customers, citizens, fans) and the organization (owners, coaches, players), which is valuable information for planning and prevention, as well as response. This paper’s theoretical analysis expands upon this notion of the buffer for the first time in sports crisis communication literature to provide a foundation for quantitative work. Sports crisis communication researchers have not attended to buffers despite organized sports being particularly instructive to understanding how damage to images and reputations is avoided. In addition to the buffers of crisis history and favourable relationships, we explain two more: sports fan communities and political economy. Yet these buffers are not exclusive to organized sports—crisis communicators may find them useful to consider in business and political crises as a way of understanding the potential damage a crisis may cause, the best approaches to respond to a given crisis, and the steps to prevent crises.

A problem of studying the damage of crises in organized sports is that rarely do events and actions in this realm lead to serious damage, such as in the kind of crisis that is a “major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry or stakeholders” (Coombs, 1999; p. 2). While crises are described as “events that threaten the image of an organization” (Coombs, 1995; p. 448), few crises in sports deal enough damage to images to reach the level of a significant threat to ticket or merchandise sales or brand images. Furthermore, Taylor and Perry (2005) describe a crisis as a “significant disruption to a business, social environment or an organization” (p. 211). However, few crises in organized sports lead to disruptions such as a shutdown of the team or an end of a coaching or playing career because of the buffers described in this paper.

Our argument is one of degree; yet this argument should not be taken to mean that sports crises are inherently less significant than crises in other fields. Indeed, those involved in organized sports face crises that would be debilitating in any other industry: mutinies of employees against leadership, the regular firing of managers to start fresh, the relocation of operations, offensive public comments from employees and managers directed to hundreds of thousands of customers. Most businesses and political bodies are not quite so public or connected with customers and stakeholders on a daily basis, resulting in many of these problems being kept in-house. Thus, while this relative privacy during crises may be perceived

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