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PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS TO PROMOTE NEW SPORTS TEAMS

by
Nancy Urban

A Thesis

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Masters of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division
Of Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey
June 30, 2000**

Approved by _____

Date approved 6-26-00

ABSTRACT

Nancy Urban

Public Relations Efforts To Promote New Sports Teams 2000, Dr. Don Bagin, Graduate Program in Public Relations, Rowan University

The purpose of this thesis was to accumulate information relative to the various public relations practices, methods, and procedures utilized by the four NHL expansion teams during the two-year period June 25, 1997 to October 7, 1999. The thesis determined the extent of common public relations elements among the four NHL expansion teams. The study was approached from four perspectives: public relations, media relations, community relations and player perspective.

Eighteen questions were asked of each team: Nashville Predators, Atlanta Thrashers, Columbus Blue Jackets and Minnesota Wild to determine the extent of communication elements common among them.

Through in-depth interviews, it was determined that each team uses similar techniques to communicate with its various audiences. Albeit informal luncheons with local beat writers, or outreach programs designed to teach school children the fundamentals of hockey, each team stresses the importance of good media relations and strives to be accessible to its audiences. Each team, although young in its NHL lifetime, has made a name for itself, both in the league and in each city.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Nancy Urban

Public Relations Efforts To Promote New Sports Teams 2000, Dr. Don Bagin, Graduate Program in Public Relations, Rowan University

The purpose of this thesis was to accumulate information relative to the various public relations practices, methods, and procedures utilized by the four NHL expansion teams during the two-year period June 25, 1997 to October 7, 1999 and to determine the extent of common public relations elements. Although the four expansion teams are located in dichotomous markets, results of interviews with the teams studied led the author to conclude that some current practices are common among them.

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Abstract

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To my movie-buddy, a.k.a. Aunt Krys, thank you for encouraging and reassuring me on that tearful October night when I could not decide what to write about, that this thesis would be written. I cherish the times we spend together and am proud to be your niece.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the future on-ice and off-ice success of the Atlanta Thrashers, Columbus Blue Jackets, Minnesota Wild and Nashville Predators. The time that the front office staffs spent with me sharing what has made them successful turned what first looked as a daunting task into an unforgettable experience. For without their insight, this research would have not been possible.

Chapter I

Introduction

PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS TO PROMOTE NEW SPORTS TEAMS

In a 1999 *Sports Business Journal* study, “300 corporate executives with control over advertising purse strings were asked which professional sports leagues do a good job of selling themselves. The National Hockey League (NHL) ranked among the lowest, with only 22% of those surveyed saying the league does a good job of selling itself.”¹

Despite this rather pessimistic statistic, Gary B. Bettman, commissioner of the NHL, has continued the mission he started in 1993 to increase the NHL’s audience. Since that time, Bettman has succeeded in his mission and, as a consequence, has increased the NHL’s public relations staff; upgraded TV deals, and gotten the league into the 1998 Olympic games.²

When asked, an ESPN commentator had this to say of Bettman’s progress:

Gary Bettman has taken a real, intelligent course. When he took over in 1993 he could have been more than willing to just take the league as a financial entity and try to point it in one direction and leave the hockey side to others. But Gary has become the orchestra leader that owners needed, but did not want. He has gotten the owners in line and he’s twisted arms and done things that nobody could ever do before. The changes he had made to the game have been good.³

In 1993, the NHL public relations staff consisted of one person. Since then, Bettman has increased the staff to 20. The Communications department is divided into three divisions: public relations, NHL image, and corporate communications. The majority of the Communications Department is based in NHL headquarters in New York City, with a few stationed in Toronto, Ontario. Jamey Horan, vice president of communications for the NHL,

¹ The Seattle Time Sunday Final Edition, Oct. 17, 1999 pg. C1.

² Business Week, Feb. 15, 1999, pg. 68-73.

³ Interview with ESPN commentator, Al Morganti, January 2000.

feels the league is “starting to penetrate with expansion and a new TV contract. Our public relations initiative during this time is crucial to our success. NHL public relations is both to educate and sell the audience due to the fact that most people in the US, including most media, did not grow up with a hockey background.”⁴

When questioned recently about his mission, Bettman stated, “You have to remember that six years ago, we were in 11 U.S. markets so we weren’t viewed as being as national as the other guys (leagues). By the turn of the 21st century, however, (when Nashville, Atlanta, Columbus and Minnesota join the league as expansion teams) we are going to be in 21 U.S. markets.”⁵ North, south, warm and cold, Bettman believes there is a national interest in hockey.⁶

In 1997, Bettman announced the entrance of four expansion teams into the NHL. The NHL opted to have their entrances span a three-year period, thereby capitalizing on the “newness” of each team. The first of these four teams, the Nashville Predators, started its season in 1998, followed by the Atlanta Thrashers in 1999. The Minnesota Wild and the Columbus Blue Jackets will enter the league in the 2000-2001 seasons respectively. This latest expansion marks the seventh time the league has grown since its 1917 inception.

Teams with early implementation dates, such as Nashville, had to hastily create and implement their entire organizational structures within a 12-month period. That kind of rapid assembly puts a special stress on the public relations staff in particular. Teams with later implementation dates such as Atlanta, Minnesota, and Columbus have similar challenges, but have longer periods of preparation time to meet these challenges. For example, Nashville had

⁴ Interview with NHL VP Communications, Jamey Horan

⁵ Brand week, v39n16, April 20, 1998.

⁶ USA Today, Nov. 25, 1996

one year, Atlanta had two years, and both Minnesota and Columbus are in the last of three years in which to create teams. How the public relations staffs of Nashville and Atlanta met these challenges and how Minnesota and Columbus are intending to meet them is the focus of this thesis.

Statement of Problem

The costs associated with professional sports are high. To purchase a franchise in the latest expansion, each team studied paid \$80 million. Since the last NHL expansion in 1991, the cost has risen \$30 million.⁷ To recapture those costs and to make a reasonable profit, each newly enfranchised team depends heavily upon its ability to promote itself.

Promoting a new team involves hard work by the public relations staff. It is their responsibility to establish lasting, positive relationships between the team and the public. This responsibility creates many challenges. Foremost among these challenges is the need to identify the audience, to identify and to implement those methodologies best able to capture audience attention and to sustain continued audience interest and enthusiasm. It is when these most important challenges are met that the team can start off in a positive fashion and have a reasonable probability of success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this longitudinal study is threefold. The first purpose is to accumulate information relative to the various public relations practices, methods, and procedures

⁷ <CNN/SI-NHL Hockey-NHL Expansion>http://cnnsi.com/hockey/nhl/news/1999/10/15/expansion_timeline>

utilized by the four NHL expansion teams during the two-year period June 25, 1997 through Oct. 7, 1999. The second purpose is to determine the extent of public relations elements common among the four NHL expansion teams. The third and final purpose is to create a data bank of current public relations practices. With regard to the last purpose, it is the researcher's belief that this data bank will provide for the updating and sharing of relevant public relations information thus facilitating future expansion initiatives.

The Need for the Study

In a 1996 news release, Bettman indicated that the NHL's "ultimate goal will be to have new teams that will be both competitively and economically successful...that will add to our fan base and that will enhance the NHL's position in the sports and entertainment marketplace."⁸ In an October 1999 interview with the Los Angeles Times, Bettman said, "It's important that every franchise be strong. There are no orphans and there are no favorite children because a league needs to be as strong as possible in every city."⁹ Though Bettman's words are directed to teams in general, his words are just as applicable to public relations staffs whose task it is to strengthen the teams through their work with the public. The NHL is only as strong as its individual teams.

When ESPN commentator Al Morganti was asked his opinion of Bettman's regard for public relations in the NHL, he stated, "Gary knows the value of having good public relations people around him to advise. He also knows the value of public relations at the local level. The public relations staff at the league level, as well as at the franchise level, is not just

⁸ NHL news release, June 26, 1996.

⁹ Los Angeles Times, Oct. 21, 1999, D8.

smiling faces. They are really doing things to promote the game.”¹⁰ Bettman’s Vice President of Communications, Jamey Horan, added, “I think Commissioner Bettman has done an excellent job at balancing the growth of the game while maintaining its heritage and history. It’s a business, and like any business your revenue has to exceed your expense.”¹¹

At this present time, no centralized professional hockey public relations information bank exists for public relations professionals to access. A collection of public relations information, therefore, is needed that will be of value to NHL teams, front offices, public relations staffs, and sports enthusiasts. Moreover, this information must be continually updated, especially as the league expands, if it is to be effective.

Although this research is limited to the study of four NHL expansion teams, its underlying concepts and general public relations methodologies may be useful to other professional sports organizations. Ideas that work with the NHL may be successfully applied to other professional sports.

Limitations

This study was limited to four NHL teams and its focus was limited to public relations efforts during each team’s first year of operation. Therefore, the results obtained and conclusions drawn may not be suitable for teams in different geographic locations with different kinds of audiences. Further limiting of this study were the geographical distances among the researcher and the teams. Interviews, therefore, relegated to telephone conversation, mail, and email. Given this methodology, the researcher was unfortunately unable to observe actual day-to-day functions firsthand.

¹⁰ Interview Al Morganti, January 2000

¹¹ Interview Jamey Horan, April 2000

Definition of Terms

NHL – National Hockey League

Commissioner – the administrative head of the National Hockey League

Expansion team – additional team added to the National Hockey League

ESPN – Essential Sports Network

GM – General Manager

All-Star – NHL player chosen to play in NHL's annual All-Star game

Philadelphia Flyers – NHL team

Columbus Bluejackets – NHL team

Minnesota Wild – NHL team

Nashville Predators – NHL team

Atlanta Thrashers – NHL team

Anaheim Mighty Ducks – NHL team

The Pond – arena Mighty Ducks play in

NBA – National Basketball Association

MLB – Major League Baseball

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Literature relating to this thesis was found utilizing ERIC, ABI Inform, WebSpirs, Lexis-Nexus, and Amazon.com. Other sources included books, media kits and interviews with professionals in the sports industry.

This chapter provides a summary of various works from individuals writing about the field of sports promotion.

Sports Marketing and Corporate Sponsorship

Two books under this topic were reviewed for this thesis. In his 1996 book, “Keeping Score: An Inside Look At Sports Marketing,” David M. Carter argues that the sports industry needs big business to survive and thrive. Robert W. Wagner, director of Advertising Sales and Services for Disney Sports Enterprises agrees with Carter. Wagner writes in the forward to Carter’s book,

In today’s business environment, sports depend heavily on the revenue generated from the sale of broadcast rights, advertising, and sponsorships, including signage and promotional opportunities. Sports also rely on the revenue from the sale of licensed merchandise and the leasing of luxury suites. This is especially true for professional sports franchises. These franchises, in an attempt to offset rising operating costs, depend on this revenue more than their traditional lifeblood, ticket sales to their games.¹²

In his belief that “Corporate America’s presence in the sports industry will increase dramatically in the years to come,”¹³ Wagner adds, “sports-business professionals need to possess a comprehensive understanding of the relationships companies form with franchises

¹² David M. Carter, “Keeping Score: An Inside Look At Sports Marketing,” (1998): vii

¹³ Ibid., ix.

and fans.”¹⁴ Wagner advises that, “Franchises must also appreciate these relationships and be aware of the importance of the total entertainment value associated with their teams. This entertainment value far exceeds the team’s performance on the field, court, or ice.”¹⁵

Throughout his book Carter educates readers on how sports franchises (professional and amateur) create and implement their strategic plans while paying close attention to their fans. In addition to the fans as an important public of franchises, Carter focuses the book’s attention on Corporate America and the need for franchises to recognize its importance.

Carter begins his book by stating,

Few Americans can deny that big business in this country actively pursues consumers in virtually all-demographic groups through its advertising efforts in the sports marketplace. This cradle-to-grave exposure-from the little leagues to the senior leagues-targets every consumer that has or is likely to have purchasing power...since consumers in fact purchase sports in one fashion or another, the focus of Keeping Score is on Corporate America’s relationship to big-time sports, especially professional team sports.¹⁶

According to Carter, there are three key public elements in the sports business that make it possible:

- Labor-athletes
- Management – owners
- Consumers – everyday fans, and private/public entities such as corporations

Carter categorizes consumers into four groups: Corporate America, the media, local governments and other municipalities, and the everyday fans.¹⁷ Though categories unto themselves, they all are of equal importance to the franchises’ public relations staff. Carter explains their importance,

Corporate America purchases billions of dollars worth of sports-related products annually, commonly in the form of advertising or sponsorships of professional sports franchises. The media consumes sports by purchasing the rights to broadcast athletic

¹⁴ Ibid., viii

¹⁵ Ibid., viii.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

events and then sells advertising time during these events to Corporate America...Local governments and other municipalities devote significant resources through team subsidies and tax-advantage programs to secure professional sports franchises.¹⁸

The fourth consumer group, the everyday fans are directly and indirectly affected by the other three consumer groups. To survive and thrive, an expansion franchise needs to rely upon the public relations staff to keep each consumer group's interest in mind.

As important as the media is to sports franchises, so too is Corporate America. According to Carter, "without big business allocating significant resources, both financial and human, the sports-entertainment industry would be paralyzed."¹⁹ Expansion franchises need to examine "the emerging fan base and the local political and media environment," before planning a public relations campaign.²⁰ Carter adds that new teams must realize that, "the competition for the entertainment dollar in each locale is different. Businesses, the media, and fans can spend their money at alternative sporting events or other forms of entertainment."²¹ It is for this reason that the majority of public relations work in the NHL is conducted on the franchise-level.

In his second chapter Carter explains the costs and benefits of sports marketing. He states, "Corporate America and sports have a long association through their mutual efforts to sell products and services to consumers-the fans,"²² and details two separate events of great significance in sports-industry history. He explains the first event as being the 1921 World Series when baseball

Authorized the sale of radio rights for \$3,000, which was divided between the two participating teams...the second event occurred in 1935 when the Gillette Company

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Ibid., 7.

²² Ibid., 11.

start sponsoring broadcasts of sporting events. Gillette believed that incorporating sports into its larger advertising and promotion effort would benefit the company's bottom-line, and the strategy was ultimately successful.²³

Business involvement in sports has not changed since these two events. Businesses believe that participation in sporting events will increase their profits. In return, sports franchises in general, and public relations staffs in particular, must realize that business involvement in sports will also increase the team's profits as well. Corporate sponsorship in essence pays off for sports franchises. Likewise, corporations engage in sports marketing campaigns to obtain four goals. According to Carter, those four goals are:

- To increase company product awareness, including name recognition
- To link awareness of the company or product to a particular lifestyle
- To differentiate a product or service from the competition
- To enhance a firm's community profile

This fourth goal, according to Carter, is of extreme importance to sports franchise public relations staffs. Working with a corporate sponsor, the public relations department can help "demonstrate a commitment to the community, conducting public relations programs at venues, and generally furthering goodwill."²⁴ He adds that these "are significant in the broad framework of building company or product awareness and overall name recognition."²⁵

Corporate sponsorship and advertising have become a lucrative source of revenue for sports franchises. Carter uses Comsat Corporation as an example. "The owner of the NHL's Colorado Avalanche is reaping the financial benefit of allowing Pepsi to attach its corporate moniker to the team's new facility, the Pepsi Arena."²⁶ Corporations that invest money into

²³ Ibid., 11.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

sponsorship can see returns as much as four times the investment. For this, many corporations view this form of advertising as extremely worthwhile.²⁷

With more corporations jumping on the proverbial bandwagon, effective sponsorship must be coupled with public relations and promotion. This triad approach prevents fans, the ultimate consumers, from believing that sports are overly commercialized. Corporate sponsorships help promote companies and the sponsored teams. Name association benefits both interested parties.

Carter discusses the importance of corporate sponsorship and the changes it has on sports. He states, "The changes have resulted in a more advertising-friendly sporting event, often to the chagrin of fans, at the stadium and at home on America's couches. Nonetheless, as Corporate America continues to spend an increasing amount on sports of all varieties, it will maintain the ability to call many of the proverbial shots."²⁸ An expansion team's public relations staff must recognize Corporate America as an extremely important target audience with which to foster good relationships.

When asked why FedEx became a corporate sponsor of the NHL, FedEx Marketing Specialist Beth Bernard states, "The NHL demonstrates speed, precision, teamwork on a global level. These also represent FedEx and its commitment to customers. Being a corporate sponsor allows FedEx to entertain more than 70 corporate clients at this year's NHL All-Star weekend in Toronto. Carter uses sneaker-conglomerate Nike's 1994 acquisition of Canstar, the world's largest hockey equipment manufacturer to demonstrate the importance of Corporate America to professional sports. The move immediately added numerous endorsers

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

to its all-star lineup of spokespeople including the Philadelphia Flyers', Eric Lindros.²⁹ This partnership benefits both Nike and the NHL. Nike acquires another market to tap, and the NHL gets another outlet in which to promote the game.

Carter continues his discussion by adding examples of big-time players in corporate sponsorship. Ray Kroc, founder of the McDonalds fast-food chain, summarized his philosophy on promotion:

In our business there are two kinds of attitudes towards advertising and public relations. One is the outlook of the begrudged who treats every cent paid for ad programs or publicity campaigns as if they were strictly expenditures. My viewpoint is that of the promoter; I never hesitate to spend money in this area, because I can see it coming back to me with interest.³⁰

McDonalds, along with the rest of Corporate America, spends more than five times as much on sporting games as do everyday fans.³¹ Carter adds:

It would be impossible for fans to enjoy sports in this country without Corporate America's marketing presence. Their participation provides owners, athletes, with hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and consumers, including everyday fans, the opportunity not only to watch sports, but, in some cases, to live vicariously through them.³²

Carter uses the NHL's Anaheim Mighty Ducks as an example of what he calls *sports marketing brilliance*. Owning a hockey team may not fit into Disney's corporate image. However, after extensive formative research, Disney found numerous marketing opportunities as a result of purchasing the franchise:

- At the time of purchase, NHL game attendance was on the rise
- Average annual household income of fan base was \$52,000
- Young, family-oriented fan base was consistent with Disney image³³

²⁹ David M. Carter, "Keeping Score: An Inside At Sports Marketing" (1998): 81.

³⁰ Ibid., 87.

³¹ Ibid., 163.

³² Ibid., 243.

By taking advantage of these opportunities, the franchise was able to successfully market itself to both fans and Corporate America. Carter states, “Attending a game at the Pond is more of a show than a sporting event. Fans enjoy family-oriented entertainment that includes cartoon characters, a clean facility, and Disney’s commitment to customer service.”³⁴ This marketing brilliance on behalf of the franchise led the league in merchandise sales and filled their arena to 98.9% of capacity in The Ducks inaugural season.³⁵

Keeping Score ends with this statement, “Corporate America enables sports not just to survive, but to thrive financially... in short, Corporate America and sports are inseparable, and their mutual reliance will foster and, in most cases, enhance the relationship in the future.”³⁶

Media Relations

Throughout his book Carter emphasizes the importance of good media relations on behalf of franchises because:

the media capitalizes on Corporate America’s involvement in sports. The media purchases rights to broadcast sporting events and pays handsomely in the expectation of selling advertising time. Essentially, the media derives profits if it generates more revenue from the sale of advertising time than it spent purchasing the broadcast rights.³⁷

In a related interview, ESPN commentator Al Morganti explained the importance of good relationships between expansion franchises and the media:

³³ Ibid., 246.

³⁴ Ibid., 246.

³⁵ Ibid., 248.

³⁶ Ibid., 258.

³⁷ Ibid., 4.

“Developing relationships with the media nationally and locally is key. The media like to feel like they know what’s going on with a team. Letting the media know when an announcement is going to be made is important.”³⁸ Morganti added that having a good relationship with the media opens up new possibilities for pitching more stories. He gave an example,

I do a weekly ESPN show, *In The Corner*. Earlier in the year, a guy from the Florida Panthers called me and said, “You know, Trevor Kidd (Florida’s goaltender), is having a terrific year. I’m not telling you he should be an All-Star, but we think you could make a good case that he’s an All-Star.”³⁹

Morganti did not think Kidd was All-Star material. However, the call led him to another story on Trevor Kidd having a terrific season. Morganti’s advice to an expansion team’s public relations staff: “Get the media thinking of your team. Because what often happens with an expansion team is they are a total afterthought.”⁴⁰ As a member of both local (Philadelphia) and national (ESPN), Morganti feels that if an expansion team can foster a personal relationship with the media, it will pay off in the end. He adds, “Don Waddell, GM of the Atlanta Thrashers, is extremely media savvy. Whenever you call Atlanta and speak to Donny, it’s great. And I think that actually works in getting the team’s name out there far more often. I know I’m much more likely to have a clip on the Thrashers just because I’m treated well.”⁴¹

Having a media savvy GM is beneficial to new teams. However, there are other people (player and personnel) that need to be media-friendly as well. Morganti feels expansion teams benefit the most from media training sessions with top players. He states, “I think training a team’s top player is worthwhile. The top player generally sets a course for the locker room. If a team’s better player is a good guy, easy to deal with, media-friendly, it sets a tone that other

³⁸ Al Morganti interview, January 2000.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

players will follow. If the players is adversarial, generally the locker room will turn that way. Attitude becomes contagious, and the locker room takes on that momentum.⁴²

Given the above, an expansion team's public relations staff must work with better players to keep the locker room media-friendly. This achievement will cast a favorable light and ultimately benefit the whole organization.

With Morganti's comments in mind, the author interviewed two veteran NHL players to gain their perspective on media training at the franchise level. Philadelphia Flyers' forward Eric Lindros has learned from both media training as well as his 12-year relationship with the media that, "honesty is the best way to go about it. If you're honest and straight up with the media, and constantly give them an honest opinion, things will work out. Always have a consistent message."⁴³

Players have their ups and downs on and off the ice, and many times in front of the media. Lindros adds, "you're going through tough times on and off the ice, but the media's always going to be there. They're not going away. It's their job to relate a story, or to give an inside scoop...It's a player's responsibility to tone down their emotions, but give enough so the media is happy."⁴⁴

As a rookie, Lindros looked to former Flyer Craig McTavish for advice on dealing with the media. He states, "Craig McTavish is probably one of the best people in terms of dealing with the media, that I've seen. His notion of honesty is something I took to heart. Come out and say exactly what you mean, and stick to what you feel is the right line."⁴⁵

⁴² Al Morganti interview, January 2000.

⁴³ Eric Lindros interview, February 2000.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Now, as a seasoned player, Lindros shares his advice for a rookie coming into the league,

The game is always going to be there. There will always be ups and downs in the game, and the media's always going to be there as well. It's how you balance the two, not letting one affect the other. Don't let the media affect your game. Your game comes first. There are going to be good times and bad times, and people are going to be patting you on the back one day, and kicking you around the next depending upon what cycle you're in. It's important not to take everything that's said to heart, not to be too high when things are good, and not to bottom-out when it turns the other way.⁴⁶

Another seasoned player, Philadelphia Flyers Left Wing John LeClair points out that media training has taught him to be more patient with the media. He states, "win or lose, you've got to talk with them, they need to do their job. They're not the ones who screwed up on the ice, so it's important that players have the right frame of mind when speaking to the media."⁴⁷ LeClair has this to add when dealing with belligerent reporters, "try to educate them by correcting in a way so they don't feel stupid. Show as much respect for them as you can."⁴⁸

NHL's Vice President of Communications Jamey Horan agrees, "It's important to respect everyone's beliefs. After all, hockey is all about respect. Anytime you educate your employees on delicate matters or sensitive situations, you are arming them with the tools necessary to succeed."⁴⁹

Many NHL players have received the tools necessary to succeed with the media from former broadcaster and media coach, Andrea Kirby. For over 20 years, Kirby has taught players, coaches, and front office staff how to have a quality relationship with the media. She has taught them how to take responsibility and handle their own career with the media.

⁴⁶ Eric Lindros interview, February 2000.

⁴⁷ John LeClair interview, February 2000.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

In her audio tapes, Kirby explains how the media affect five parts of a player's career:

- image
- atmosphere you play in
- ticket sales
- fan base creation
- career longevity

She states that although the media creates the image of the player, the player has control over what image the media sees. Perception comes from the words players use to express themselves, tone of voice used, and most importantly their body language.

Maintaining good relationships with the media creates a positive working environment; players enjoy playing the game and the media enjoy covering it. By publicizing the sports team, the media creates a fan base and helps sell tickets. If players maintain good relationships during their playing career, chances are their careers will be lengthened. Kirby uses former Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Steve Carlton as an example. Throughout his career Carlton upheld a policy: no interviews with the media. Once retired, he lifted that restriction. To his surprise, most of the media were no longer interested in him. Kirby theorizes that if Carlton had allowed the media access to him during his career, he may have held their interest after his playing days were over. She encourages players and front offices to take advantage of free publicity. Kirby cites *USA Today* as charging \$91,000 for a front-page ad. She adds that the front-page is not for sale; in fact, the paper wants to give it away free. Maintaining good relationships with the media can practically help a team ensure itself coverage in national print media such as *USA Today*.

⁴⁹ Jamey Horan interview, April 2000.

Sports Information Director

Melvin Helitzer devotes his book, “The Dream Job: Sports Publicity, Promotion and Marketing,” to explaining the job of a Sports Information Director (SID). Today, public relations directors perform a SID’s job. Although the name has changed, many of the job functions remain the same.

Helitzer begins his book by explaining why professional sports is so lucrative. In his chapter, “The Dash for Cash,” he states, “franchises have become blockbuster capital gains investments.”⁵⁰ Professional sports franchises, if managed and promoted properly, can make a many investors rich. He adds, “franchises are a highly profitable bonanza for owners, administrators and, in the pro ranks, for participants too.”⁵¹ Professional franchises need to be successful as a team, but more importantly, they need to be successful in the front office. Helitzer states, “to succeed in pro sports, you need two winning teams: one on the field and one in the front office – and the most consistent must be the one in the front office.”⁵² Consistency is key to promoting and running a successful franchise.

Helitzer lists the four main monetary wells that support this lucrative business:

- Corporate advertisers and sponsors
- Season tickets and luxury boxes
- Licensed merchandise royalties
- Stadium concession sales⁵³

Executives working in the front offices, especially SIDs, must constantly keep these revenue streams in mind when promoting new sports teams.

As new sports teams emerge each year, more and more skilled individuals are needed to help promote and run them. Helitzer states, “Pro or amateur, every new sport and every

⁵⁰ Melvin Helitzer, “The Dream Job,” (2000): 1.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵² Ibid., 3.

sport, there are 10 front office executives for every player on the team.”⁵⁴ The NHL has six minor leagues, which means more opportunities for professionals with promotional skills.

Although new sports teams are popping up in more places, leagues continue to hold strict guidelines for expansion teams. Helitzer adds, “franchise committees look carefully at the marketing potential of each city. They look for financial strength of the owners and local government support.”⁵⁵ Franchise committees place great emphasis on financial stability when choosing an expansion site. Franchises can thank the committee for its scrutiny. In over 60 years, “no franchise has ever been sold at a figure lower than its last purchase price. No other industry can make that claim.”⁵⁶ For example, in 1996, the Quebec Nordiques were sold for \$15 million. Today, the franchise is worth over \$75 million.⁵⁷ The fact that the Nordiques became the Stanley Cup Champion Colorado Avalanche may have something to do with its increased value.

Helitzer ends his introductory chapters by asking the question: “How important is public relations in professional sports?”⁵⁸ He answers his own question in chapter two by explaining the responsibilities of a SID. Helitzer narrows the SID’s mission into one sentence, “A SID’s assignment is to sell fans the illusion that the outcome of a game is so important that they are willing to support their faith with dollars.”⁵⁹ As stated before, the title SID and public relations director are interchangeable. Helitzer, however, chooses to refer to the position as SID.

⁵³ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 59.

Many fans let love of sports cloud their opinions of the business of sports. For example, people can often be heard saying, *I love the sport; I could run a sports team*. This type of thinking is what Helitzer refers to as delusions of inadequacy. He states, “Just being in love with sports is no longer a qualification for professional employment. The millions of dollars for personnel and the billions of dollars allocated for facilities and broadcasting are tangible proof that sports requires skilled professionals both on and off the field.”⁶⁰ Today, the NHL is made up of professionals on and off the ice. “In the last few years it has become equally obvious that no one can be involved with pro sports without an intimate knowledge of sports public relations,” Helitzer adds.⁶¹ No longer is a SID only required to possess excellent writing skills; he must have a working knowledge of marketing, promoting and crisis communication. Expansion teams benefit from professionals who are skilled in these areas. Helitzer lists what SIDs are responsible for producing:

- Media guides
- Game programs
- Official team or conference yearbooks
- Preseason schedules
- Various promotional brochures
- Community relations/fan relations materials⁶²

Many teams segment public relations into communications, media relations, fan relations, and community relations. In pro sports, the SID directs the staff performing these functions and often the SID has final approval on what the department does. In pro sports, most SIDs are males, although the number of females running public relations departments continues to grow. “In 1977 Susie Mathieu became the first female SID in the NHL. Now six NHL teams

⁶⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁶¹ Ibid., 60.

⁶² Ibid., 63.

have female public relations directors.”⁶³ Helitzer adds, “the financial stakes are too high for a two-level employment attitude.”⁶⁴ Professional sports franchises seek qualified, skilled professionals, whether male or female.

He continues by emphasizing that “in the front office, the bottom line is selling.”⁶⁵ Although profit is most important to franchise owners and investors, it is the public relations department’s responsibility to educate management on the need to engender relationships with the public to help ensure steady profits. Public relations exists to successfully foster relationships with all of the franchises’ audiences to sell a product – the game.

Public relations departments employ various ways of engendering and maintaining good relationships with their audiences. Helitzer spends the remainder of his book describing effective techniques that SIDs should use on the job. Chapters three, four and five highlight when a story is appropriate for print, radio or television.

Albeit SIDs may have three channels, through which to beam their messages, according to Helitzer, “every sports event presents three major news opportunities when the media is legitimately interested in timely information”:

- Advance stories which announce the event
- Event action and results
- Follow-up stories in which team players and coaches critique the results and rehash exciting moments

The most frequently used form of communication to print media is the news release. The drawback to news releases, however, is that if the news director think it is not news, the story does not get publicity.

⁶³ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 71.

When a news feature does not lend itself well to print, the alternatives are television and/or radio. In print, the headline must grab reader's attention. In radio, "the first five seconds has to quickly grab attention."⁶⁶ Out of over 10,000 radio stations in the United States, more than 100 are all-sports dedicated. Radio allows for niche marketing (e.g. sports fans). Helitzer emphasizes the importance of this medium to SIDs. Local sports radio programs offer an outlet for teams to talk with the fans. SIDs can use radio talk shows as a way of being accessible to audiences. He adds, "All-sports radio provides SIDs with innumerable promotional opportunities and even two-way conversations with fans. It's also an opportunity for a team representative to answer questions immediately and, in a crisis situation, attempt to ameliorate problems on the spot."⁶⁷ Sports fans enjoy the opportunity of expressing their opinions directly to the team. New teams can use local radio shows to engender good relationships with potential fans. In cities where hockey is the "new game" in town, SIDs can educate listeners about the rules so they can appreciate the game more.

No matter which media a SID uses, success or failure depends upon good media relations. Helitzer states, "a SID can not fully understand sports news without fully understanding sports reporters."⁶⁸ In today's market audiences, inundated with glossy advertising, one becomes skeptical of hype in most areas except sports. Fans and sports writers alike love the hype that trade rumors bring into a town. If the rumor mill mentions trading a star player, the all-sports radio stations' lines light up with callers. Sports writers feed off of hype because in sports, hype sells. Though sports writers enjoy sports hype, they usually are not investigative in nature. Helitzer adds, "Sports writers rarely try to trip athletes

⁶⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 239.

into horrendous confessions about steroids, crime, hypocrisy, greed, and duplicity. It is only when an athlete's private life is exposed that editorial sharks bare their teeth."⁶⁹

To ensure a sports writer will cover a story, Helitzer give six techniques SIDs can use:

- Set up an informal conversation between coach/player and writer during practice, in a hotel lobby or on a team trip
- Set up an interview by a telephone Q&A
- Set up an interview by direct Q&A, such as a locker room interview
- Hold off-the-record private session, such as a lunch, bar or dinner meeting (note: Helitzer does not explain his meaning of "off-the-record." Readers should be aware of the consequences of going off-the-record with a reporter.)
- Hold an in-depth, one-on-one, in-person interview in a home or office
- Hold a formal news conference⁷⁰

These six techniques can help a SID engender good relationships with the media covering the team. Just as SIDs need to work well with the media, so too do the players themselves.

According to NFLPA executive director Gene Upshaw, "It's more important than ever that players cooperate with the media... It's important that salaries rise and revenues rise, and the only way that salaries rise is if revenues rise. Promoting the game through the media is one way of accomplishing that goal."⁷¹

Many authors have written on media relations. Melvin Helitzer is among the few who have written from a sports perspective and included the importance of public relations. In his list of 14 ways to deal with the press, number three states, "Consider the public interest in every operating decision. Your reputation depends far more on what you do than on what you say. Try giving your senior public relations expert a seat at the table when decisions are

⁶⁹ Ibid., 241.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 241.

⁷¹ Ibid., 242.

made.”⁷² SIDs with proper public relations training and knowledge are able to counsel management on what various audiences want out of the franchise.

Unlike most industries, gaining publicity is key in sports. SIDs must gain audience attention for the team. The best “controlled publicity comes from one-on-one relationships through interviews and speeches.”⁷³ SIDs must educate GM’s, coaches, and players of the importance of meeting one-on-one with influential media. New England Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe believes that professional athletes “are in a high-profile entertainment industry, which creates unique opportunities to communicate with fans on a daily basis. How we communicate, especially the messages we deliver to children, can have a profound effect on the image of sports for the next generation.”⁷⁴ Maintaining good relationships with the media is crucial for promoting not only the player, but also the team and the game.

Most SIDs know the four forms of communication: face-to-face, print, electronic, and special event. Special events are where a SID’s creative and strategic thinking abilities can shine. Special events provide SIDs with a rewarding assignment. Helitzer states, “No business other than sports encourages imaginative promotions more... each game is not only another opening night but another chance to restage the show.”⁷⁵ SIDs cannot control the outcome of the game; however, SIDs can ensure the game experience “never lets the spectator be bored.”⁷⁶ Promotional skills are extremely crucial for teams who have moved into a new city but still do not have players. SIDs must be creative and think strategically enough to promote a product and sell a sport that people cannot yet see or enjoy. Not only

⁷² Ibid., 251.

⁷³ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 289.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 315.

does a SID have to introduce the new sport, but must also maintain audience interest for up to one year before the puck is even dropped at the first game.

Once the puck is dropped, promoting does not stop. For a promotion to be successful, Helitzer says it must generate a profit and enhance the following goals:

- Paid attendance
- Corporate tie-ins
- Media coverage

In addition to night-after-night promoting the franchises night-after-night, leagues also promote the game during All-Star weekends. “No longer are they just traditional one-day showcases. The game is just the final event of two to four days and nights of competitive and profitable exhibitions staged for millions on television and thousands of thrillseekers in the stands, who pay \$50 to \$100 a ticket just for the extra events.”⁷⁷

With all of the hype and promotion, it is easy to believe that a crisis cannot occur in this fantasy-packed industry. This disillusioned thinking can be dangerous and costly. Helitzer states, “There is a potential crisis brewing inside every event, because sports off the field are as unpredictable as each play on the field. A crisis is the most challenging test in a SID’s career.”⁷⁸ If promoting takes creativity, crisis definitely takes strategic thinking. Crisis, no matter how large or small, causes damage and can be very costly in dollars and reputation. Therefore, to limit liability, Helitzer advises every sports organization to “have in place a carefully scripted and rehearsed plan of action to foresee, to forestall, or to follow every conceivable exigency.”⁷⁹ He adds that a SID should keep a clip file of crises faced by other

⁷⁷ Ibid., 329.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 393.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 393.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 396.

teams. Researching how other teams handled crises can help the planning process. Helitzer lists four main criteria needed in a crisis plan:

- Emergency contact numbers
- One credible spokesperson
- Management crisis team
- Media release timetable⁸⁰

He adds three things a SID should *never* do during a crisis:

- Never count on your media source to be around to cover your emergency
- Never speculate about the cause of the problem
- Never go “off the record” or say “no comment”⁸¹

SIDs face many high points (high ticket sales, special events) and unfortunately low points (crisis) too. Maintaining good relationships with the media, public, and community will help a team in good times as well as bad times. Still, good relationships may be jeopardized if a team neglects to create a working crisis plan. A team may be fortunate enough to never be involved in a crisis situation; however, if one should ever occur, the team would be prepared.

The World Wide Web has changed the way people seek and receive information. The Internet has become an instantaneous way of getting the latest news on almost everything and anything. More and more companies have added a website to their list of contact information, and sports has jumped onto the proverbial bandwagon. Now, sports fans from around the world can join in on the fun of any team no matter where it is located. The teams’ websites also offer opportunities for fans to interact with players and personnel as well as provide a forum for fan feedback. This new way of communicating with various publics is one to which SIDs are receptive. In his chapter “Nothin’ But Net,” Helitzer states, “Sports and the Web offer the vicarious thrill of interactivity. Through the Web, fans are not just SID’s

Monday morning quarterbacks but 24-hour desktop partners.”⁸² With this new technology come new skill requirements for SIDs such as knowledge of cyberspace and web design.

Fans need not pick a newspaper to read the latest story on their favorite team, they can now enter the team’s website to find out a plethora of information. Teams’ websites now offer chat rooms, news releases, stats, player bios, and front office personnel. Real audio and video clips add further depth to a web site by offering information in new dimensions.

Expansion teams, most of which do not have players, have greatly benefited from this new communication tool. For instance, the Columbus Blue Jackets web site features a counter that keeps track of the number of days remaining until the first game. Fans visiting the Minnesota Wild web site can find out about Minnesotans playing in the NHL. Both web sites offer fans the opportunity to watch construction on the new arenas. A picture is taken once an hour of construction and posted onto the web site for fans to view. These “teaser” features work well for new franchises that do not have a product (a team) to sell by educating and enticing fans to root for the team once the season begins.

Helitzer explains that teams’ websites should target four audiences:

- Media
- Fans
- Staff and athletes
- Revenue sources

A team’s website offers the media “24-hour access to information that makes for an indispensable tool for reports whose time-zone deadlines vary. The ease with which the Web

⁸¹ Ibid., 397.

⁸² Ibid., 429.

can be updated permits SIDs to deliver media news whenever a SID wishes and, for reporters, it is waiting for them whenever they need it.”⁸³

For fans wishing to get information off of a team’s website; Helitzer states that the information “must be brief, timely, accurate, contain good graphic design, and offer click-through links, and be updated often.”⁸⁴ Chat sessions offer fans a chance to talk with their favorite player and/or front office personnel. Helitzer adds that the ease of on-line chat sessions can “substitute for some fatiguing autograph sessions and personal appearances.”⁸⁵ From a front office perspective, on-line chats with staff offer fans an inside look at the business side of sports.

The last point Helitzer makes concerns the opportunity web sites offer to teams looking for more avenues of revenue. Advertising, fundraising, ticket sales, and merchandise sales can all be done on the web site. A team’s web site can offer sponsors “pinpoint accuracy in target marketing and the ability to measure each ad by the number of hits.”⁸⁶ By allowing sponsors to research the response rate of ads, teams can assure themselves longer relationships with corporate sponsors. If the sponsors feel as though the response rate is too low, the web can be quickly updated thus saving time and money. Tickets, luxury boxes, and merchandise can be sold on the team’s web site, adding to the amount of sales and thus more revenue for the team.

Web sites offer teams a chance to host a special event “cyberstyle.” Many new teams have used their web sites to offer fans a chance to “name the mascot.” Helitzer uses the Carolina Hurricanes as an example:

⁸³ Ibid., 432.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 433.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 435.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 436.

The Carolina Hurricanes conducted a “Name that Mascot” contest online for their new NHL team. Despite a pay-off that was strictly petty cash (four tickets to the home opener), 40,000 fans participated, and a full house attended the game where the winner was honored. For the fans, they felt one of theirs had made a difference.

Web sites, along with more traditional forms of communication, allow SIDs to maintain relationships with fans, sponsors, and the media. These forms of communication are just vehicles; SIDs must shoulder the responsibility to counsel front office management on the best ways to use them.

Chapter 3

Procedures

Four sources were used to compile research for this thesis: 1) the database at Rowan University Library; 2) the Internet and the World Wide Web; 3) literature packets provided by the NHL; and 4) in-depth interviews through telephone, US mail, and email.

Literature Search

An information search via computer of current literature on professional sports and public relations was conducted at the Rowan University Library. Article searches were conducted on Lexis-Nexus, ABI-INFORM, and Webspirs at the Rowan University Library, and Amazon.com. Key words used to locate relevant materials were public relations, professional sports, expansion teams, National Hockey League, promotion, and marketing.

Keywords used to locate information on the Internet and World Wide Web through NorthernLights.com, DogPile.com, Snap.com, Barnes & Nobels.com, and Amazon.com were public relations, professional sports, expansion teams, National Hockey League, promotion, and marketing. The researcher, to obtain readily accessible information on the public relations efforts, visited the web sites posted by the four NHL expansion teams.

Because of the scarcity of information written on the field of sports public relations the author conducted primary research through interviews conducted via US mail, telephone, and email with public relations practitioners from each expansion team, and professionals in the media. The information compiled from various interviews with various individuals representing many facets of professional hockey (e.g. players, front office personnel, league executives, and members of national media) appears in chapter four.

Chapter Four

Findings

The results of the author's interviews are pertinent to this study in that they help readers understand the various practices implemented by each team studied. When asked what piece of advice he would give to a new team's public relations department who wanted to build a good relationship with its audiences, Jamey Horan states,

It is important to demonstrate that a pro hockey team adds value to a city more than just in entertainment value. People will identify and will be more likely to follow teams that care about the community.⁸⁷

When public relations practitioners of future expansion teams read this, they will be better equipped to do their job—creating a first-class franchise and positive brand image.

As stated before, this thesis focuses on the public, media and community relations methods and procedures practiced by the four teams studied. It is the author's intent to research and report extent of public relations elements that are common among each team.

The author asked specific questions in three categories: public relations, media relations, and community relations. The same 18 questions were asked of each team. The teams' responses to the author's questions follow.

Who are your target audiences?

All four teams are targeting sports fans (male-female, ages 18-50). They also target the media to help shape the teams' perception of the franchise. The media is used as a way to reach the ultimate target – the fans. Other audiences the teams include are shareholders and the community.

How do you reach your audiences?

Each team reaches its audiences mainly through its official team website and mass media advertising (billboards, radio, television, and newspaper). Direct mail pieces are also a popular way each team uses to reach certain audiences. The Minnesota Wild is the first NHL franchise to create and distribute media guide one year prior to playing its first season game. The Atlanta Thrashers sends out its official newspaper, "Thrash Talk," to various audiences in the Atlanta area. The Columbus Blue Jackets uses Chamber of Commerce meetings to reach out to the Columbus, Ohio community. The Nashville Predators has uses its official team web site to reach out to local audiences as well as potential audiences around the world.

How far is your fan base?

Each team tries to cater to all types of fans: family, date-night couples, guys/girls night-out groups, corporate groups, older couples, etc. Both Nashville and Atlanta reach out approximately 40 miles beyond the immediate city limits. Columbus and Minnesota reach out to potential fans in bordering states of Ohio and Minnesota.

What are your public relations goals?

Each team is committed to creating the perception of a first-class franchise. They make sure everyone in each respective state, (Ohio, Minnesota, Georgia and Tennessee) knows about the franchise. Each team's goal is product recognition and positive brand image, and that the media know that both player and personnel are accessible for comment. For example, Atlanta made sure that its message-- that it was a young team-- was made clear. Atlanta has worked hard at creating the perception that it is looking forward to the 2000 Entry Draft and developing young talent to take the team to a new level next season.

⁸⁷ Jamey Horan interview, April 2000

How do you measure those goals?

Feedback from fans as well as the media is stated as an important way for each team to measure its public relations goals. The Columbus Blue Jackets state that they are committed to making sure that everyone in the state of Ohio knows of its product through newspapers, radio shows, television shows, and its website. Because both Minnesota and Columbus have not as yet played a game, mass exposure is currently their top priority right now.

Nashville and Atlanta both measure their public relations goals through press clippings, ticket sales, and by word-of-mouth. In particular, Atlanta constantly tracks what is being said about the team not only from season ticket holders and fans, but people around the NHL and in the industry.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Without players on the ice, both Minnesota and Columbus face different challenges off the ice. One of those challenges Minnesota has faced is promoting the Wild for the last two and a half years without any players or games. All the organization has to sell is its name, arena, and recently, its jerseys. What Minnesota has done is to feature Minnesotans in the NHL on its web site to constantly generate interest in the game.

Columbus states working in a start-up situation as one of its challenges. At full staff, Columbus will have front-office personnel of 65 people. Right now it has 20. This shortage causes the present staff members to take on other responsibilities outside of their particular fields. Staff members have turned this challenge into a learning experience from which they have learned other functions of the organization.

Another challenge Columbus faces with its start-up staff situation is its budgets which will not be complete until the team is on the ice. Columbus states it knows what its objectives are but sometimes executing them is not so easy due to a lack of financial resources. Nonetheless, Columbus maintains that it is up to the front office to still achieve the organization's objectives without having all the financial means to do so.

Atlanta states that maintaining a positive position on every aspect of its organization is its biggest challenge thus far. Going into its inaugural season, the Thrashers front office knew the team was going to have a tough year. However, Tom Hughes, media relations director, states, "When you experience it, and watch it permeate throughout the organization both on and off the ice, it is very difficult to maintain a positive outlook and a positive position on where this team is going and the reality the team is experiencing."⁸⁸ Hughes adds, "Getting snide remarks (you guys are pathetic), makes it hard to stay focused and concentrate on the end result that our inaugural season has been a building year. This 'building year' message has not been used as an excuse for losing, but rather to have the media understand that we are staying focused on getting better with each year and for them to support the efforts of our organization on and off the ice."⁸⁹

After two seasons, Nashville states selling 12,000 season tickets six months before its team began to play in a non-traditional hockey market as its biggest challenge.

What has been your biggest public relations effort thus far?

In addition to selling 12,000 season tickets, Nashville lists educating fans to a new sport and getting fans to attend one game among its greater challenges. Nashville states if it could get fans into the arena once, it was sure the game would sell itself.

⁸⁸ Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

⁸⁹ Ibid

Both Atlanta and Minnesota state working with the media as its biggest public relations effort thus far. Atlanta's media relations director Tom Hughes states,

My most single largest effort has been to provide the media the best access to my managing and coaching staff, and players when the media needs something. This could be from something as simple as an electrical outlet in the wall to getting an interview for them. I have worked hard to set the tone that we are here to provide our audiences with a service to the best of our ability.⁹⁰

In its formative years, Minnesota's media relations department has focused on building relationships with the media and its partners by providing the highest quality service. As a consequence, it shapes the overall image and perception of the organization through television/radio broadcasts, team publications and on the Internet.

Columbus states without question that its biggest public relations effort was its jersey unveiling on October 14, 1999.

Have you achieved this effort?

Columbus Blue Jackets media relations coordinator Gary Kohn states,

Absolutely, we had over 5,000 people attend the event. Locally all four television networks covered the event "live" with repeated reports throughout the next day. Also locally major coverage was achieved in the *Columbus Dispatch*, *Suburban News*, *The Other Paper*, *Associated Press* and seven different radio stations. In addition, the Blue Jackets website generated the most traffic it ever had. The day after the unveiling the jersey was given to all the morning radio shows and the event was the talk of the morning. Statewide television, radio, and newspapers in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Dayton, to name a few, also covered the event. This enthusiasm resulted in tremendous sales in these markets. On a national scale Hockey Night in Canada, CTV Sports, ESPN, CNN, MSG Network and NHL Productions all covered the event. USA Today ran a color photo of the full uniform and CBS.com, ESPN.com, USAtoday.com and NHL.com all ran photos and stories immediately after the unveiling.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Gary Kohn interview, January 2000

Atlanta, Minnesota and Nashville share similar responses to the extent of this achievement. Both Nashville and Minnesota state that this effort is a “work in progress.” Minnesota adds that there is always room for improvement. Nashville’s communications director Gerry Helper, adds, “We have enjoyed initial success, but building a fan base is an on-going project. We are always seeking new fans and introducing new fans to the game.”⁹²

Atlanta states the feedback it has received about its staff has been positive. Hughes adds, “ We have a lot to learn and we’re continuing to improve. More than anything I think the people, especially the media, look at us as caring about our jobs and what we do. We take pride in what we do.”⁹³

How do marketing and public relations work together in your organization?

All four organizations agree that integrating marketing and public relations is critical. All state that marketing and public relations work closely together to promote each franchise. Both Nashville and Minnesota agree that everyone on each respective staff must be on the same page to present the clearest and most consistent message possible to their various audiences.

Columbus adds that its marketing and public relations staffs work hand-in-hand during promotional efforts. Kohn states, “the marketing department comes up with promotions or ways to get people involved in our product, maybe even buying tickets, while the public relations department supports the marketing efforts by making sure the media is aware of what the team is doing.”⁹⁴

⁹² Gerry Helper interview, January 2000

⁹³ Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

⁹⁴ Gary Kohn interview, January 2000

Atlanta states its organization cannot function without marketing and public relations working together. Hughes cannot be more adamant about this mission. He adds that, “all the directors meet once a week to go over the goals and objectives for events coming up. So we’re all working together.”⁹⁵

Is a public relations representative involved in the overall decision making process within your organization?

All four teams answer yes; a senior member of the public relations staff is involved. However, Columbus states the public relations staff often does not get to decide on when information is released on behalf of the organization; however, the public relations staff does get to recommend the best way to release the information.

Please finish this sentence- We would consider ourselves successful in our public relations efforts if...

Minnesota states, “if we achieved our goal of providing the highest level of quality service and the image of the Minnesota Wild is held in the uppermost regard in the NHL and the Twin Cities.”⁹⁶

Columbus states, “if we continue to build relationships locally, statewide and nationally so that the Blue Jackets product is a household name, resulting in an ongoing sellout streak at Nationwide Arena.”⁹⁷

Nashville states, “if we continue to enhance our efforts and reach people on a regular basis, by presenting outrageous customer service and community service.”⁹⁸

Atlanta states, “if we succeed at providing all of our audiences with the most accessibility, and accurate and timely information.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

⁹⁶ Bill Robertson interview, January 2000

⁹⁷ Gary Kohn interview, January 2000

⁹⁸ Gerry Helper interview, January 2000

What have you done to establish a relationship with the media?

All teams agree: establishing a good relationship with the media is crucial for franchise success. To establish relationships with the media, Columbus states it constantly talks with them. Kohn states, “Regularly we provide the media, locally, statewide and nationally with news releases, memos, phone calls, emails, packets of information, magazines, TV show tapes, etc. to maintain constant correspondence. The more we talk, the more they will know about our product.”¹⁰⁰

Continuing to reach its goals of high quality service, Minnesota makes sure to return all phone calls from the media and goes out of its way to provide its media outlets with information concerning the Wild and hockey. Minnesota’s director of communications Bill Robertson, states, “Examples of this include hand-delivering media guide sets each year and providing over 200 media members with Wild jerseys the day we unveiled our jerseys. Whenever we host a news conference, we invite all media outlets, television, radio, print, etc. and not just invite sports people; we invite all media sources.”¹⁰¹

Judd Hancock, media relations coordinator with the Nashville Predators, discusses that in the beginning, the organization held informal luncheons in the arena. At those luncheons the team would have different speakers from the Predator organization and the NHL. Hancock states, “We would have a luncheon to introduce our executive staff so the media would have a chance to get to know them on an informal basis. This was good because often the media only get to see the executives at news conferences and during the game and you really don’t get a chance to talk informally.”¹⁰² Hancock adds that this setting was a

⁹⁹ Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

¹⁰⁰ Gary Kohn interview, January 2000

¹⁰¹ Bill Robertson interview, January 2000

¹⁰² Judd Hancock interview, January 2000

good way of helping convince the media that the organization as approachable and accessible.

In addition to meetings and greetings, Nashville used the media luncheons as forums for what it calls Hockey 101. Hancock states, “We would have our GM, coaches, and writers talk about hockey and different technicalities of the game (e.g. offsides, assists, etc.)...Bringing in different personalities to talk about different facets of the game was extremely beneficial in our efforts to educate the media. We even had our writers put on skates and go onto the ice to gain a player’s perspective of the game. We wanted to make the writers in this town comfortable with hockey as well as our front office, and I think the luncheons made that happen.”¹⁰³

Before being awarded an expansion franchise, Atlanta began the process of immediately identifying and targeting local as national media. The organization wanted to impress upon the media that it was serious about the bid and that it was fully capable of supporting a NHL franchise.

Once Atlanta was awarded an expansion franchise, its announcement was made in conjunction with the league. Hughes states, “During this process, the NHL had a season taking place, so there were many opportunities through All-Star weekends and various NHL functions to in which to participate. The media would be at these events, so it was very easy to run our messages out to them.”¹⁰⁴

Once established, keeping those coveted relationships with the media is extremely important, according to Hughes. He adds, “You foster the relationship, and then you think of new ways to get your message out there. We even had our logo unveiled live on the Internet

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

and were the first professional team to ever do that. We were able to satisfy two audiences at once: our local fan base was invited to come down to the CNN Center for a live unveiling. And we also were able to get a larger audience on the Internet.”¹⁰⁵

Do you conduct media training sessions for players and other personnel who deal with the media?

So far none of the teams have formally conducted media training sessions. However, Minnesota states that it plans to conduct such training sessions during Summer 2000 once it has players and its communications staff is complete.

Columbus intends to make sure all personnel on its staff, management and players are prepared to interact with the media in a professional, courteous manner. Kohn states, “Most of our athletes and personnel on our staff that are expected to interact with the media have been doing so for several years and will not require such training.”¹⁰⁶ However, if certain personnel do in fact require training, Columbus is committed to helping them through that process until they are comfortable in dealing with the media.

Nashville has discussed bringing in Andrea Kirby to formally train its players. Though a formal training session as yet to occur, Nashville’s communications staff has talked with the players on the importance of the media and the need for its players to be accessible to the media and accountable for their actions on the ice. Hancock states that the Nashville players are open and receptive to future training sessions.

Like Nashville, Atlanta has yet to conduct a formal training sessions with its players. However, Hughes himself trained the GM, Assistant GM, and entire coaching staff in media relations. Hughes states his main lesson during the training sessions was “having a consistent

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Gary Kohn interview, January 2000

message, and having an agenda in their minds as they go into each interview.”¹⁰⁷ As far as players being trained, Hughes informs that the NHL does not mandate media relations training for players. However, he adds that through his personal relationships with the players and his staff, he tries to impress upon them the importance of good media relation skills. Hughes states, “We make sure each player knows where to go for answers to their questions. In a perfect world I would have liked to conduct media training sessions. But, in our situation it was not possible because we had 65 players in our training camp and were expected to put a team on the ice within three and a half weeks...before next season, I’d like to work in some media training sessions.”¹⁰⁸

Do you have an image crisis plan in existence?

Atlanta, Nashville and Columbus answered that no, they do not have an image crisis plan in existence. Although one is not in writing, Hughes states that he and GM, Don Waddell have discussed various scenarios. His provides an example:

From day one we built our team around goaltending. Damian Rhodes was our first acquisition. He has been one of the cornerstones of our franchise. So when he went down 36 games ago with an ankle injury, we expected him to only be out a couple of weeks. Don and I talked about the importance of communicating Damian’s progress immediately as opposed to sitting on information. So whatever we have, updates on injury status, we inform the media...It is something that I need to do, more for my own benefit. But I feel as an organization, we have a very strong awareness of crisis and how to deal with them through experience.¹⁰⁹

As previously indicated, Nashville does not have an image crisis plan. However it does have a written emergency plan. The tornado that ripped through downtown Nashville triggered the writing of this plan. Hancock informs that informal talks have been conducted

¹⁰⁷ Tom Hughes

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

regarding worst-case scenarios (e.g. John Rocker, Marty McSorley), but nothing yet has been put down on paper.

Columbus states that it is too early in franchise existence to worry about an image crisis. It adds that the organization will most likely develop a policy concerning crisis at some point.

The one team having an image crisis plan in existence is Minnesota. Aaron Sickman, media relations coordinator states, “The two situations we have prepared for are players getting into trouble with the law and a labor relations strife between players and management. As we have witnessed in recent strikes in MLB, the NBA, and the NHL, no one wins. Fans become alienated and we have a plan in place to keep our fans interested in the sport of hockey, even if our players are not available to us.”¹¹⁰

What has been your biggest media relations effort thus far?

Both Minnesota’s and Columbus’ biggest media relations effort thus far has been in step with its public relations effort. Both Nashville and Atlanta believe it has been educating and establishing good relationships with the media. Judd Hancock states that Nashville has worked hard to explain the game and all its technicalities to the media. He adds that because of this training, the media have become knowledgeable. However, he states that it is a work in progress, “For example, just the other night our team was given two assists for a goal. This confused the media, they thought we got an extra assist and our staff had to educate them on that the technicalities of the game allow for two assists. The media realizes that we are a young team and they have been patient.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Aaron Sickman interview, January 2000

¹¹¹ Judd Hancock interview, January 2000

Tom Hughes believes establishing a relationship of trust with the media as his staff's biggest effort. This has been achieved through informal luncheons held throughout the season where the media got to know different members of the front office. Hughes adds, "Through those informal luncheons and Don's personality, it has been easy for me to establish the relationship and gain the respect [and trust] of the media."¹¹²

What programs do you have that are mutually beneficial to your fans as well as the organization?

All four teams are committed to making a difference in their respective city, both on and off the ice through various projects, programs and services. Terri Hickman, Atlanta Thrashers community relations manager, believes all of the programs Atlanta is doing are beneficial to the fans as well as to the organization.

Similar to Atlanta, Columbus believes all of its programs are mutually beneficial to the fans as well as to the organization. The organization has worked hard to offer the community both the Columbus Blue Jacket Foundation as well as "Stinger's Go for the Goal" program.

At the time of this writing, the Minnesota Wild media relations staff was performing community relations duties, therefore the following answers come from Aaron Sickman.

Minnesota states that its "Grassroots Hockey" program and "Speakers Bureau" as mutually beneficial to both the fans and the organization.

The Minnesota Grassroots Hockey Initiative is about all levels of hockey in Minnesota... from mini-mites to adult recreation leagues and everything in between. The purpose of the Minnesota "Grassroots Hockey" program is to continue the growth of hockey throughout the state and give back to the entire hockey community.

¹¹² Tom Hughes interview, January 2000

Nashville's Predator Foundation is geared towards the community and canned food drives while player appearances are geared towards fans. The foundation provides the structure and focus allowing the Predators hockey club to continually enhance the quality of life in middle Tennessee. In addition, it provides structure by which resources can be objectively and logically allocated to the community and gives the community an open door to the team for requests.¹¹³

What methods do you have in place to receive feedback from your audiences?

Atlanta has placed feedback sections on its official team web site. The community relations department engages in face-to-face interaction with the public at special events in the arena on game days.

Minnesota receives feedback via its website where people can email questions/comments. For feedback on specific areas such as its name, jersey or game entertainment, Minnesota organizes focus groups that afford season ticket holders and non-season ticket holders the opportunity to voice their opinions to the organization.

Both Columbus and Nashville receive feedback via their websites. However, Nashville states that it does not solicit feedback regarding community relations.

How do you respond to audience feedback?

Atlanta responds to as many inquiries as possible through both email and regular mail and responds to complaints via telephone.

Minnesota has committed to responding to all inquiries within 24 hours. Although Columbus and Nashville use their team websites to elicit audience feedback; it is undetermined how each team responds to such.

¹¹³ www.nashvillepredators.com

What has been your biggest community relations effort thus far?

Atlanta states its biggest community relations efforts so far have been The Atlanta Thrashers Foundation and “Score for Schools” program.

Created by the hockey organization, the foundation is a non-profit, grant-making public charity that assists charitable, educational and public service organizations. Although the Thrashers support a variety of community programs on various levels, the primary focus of the foundation is Georgia’s children.

The “Score for Schools” program is an educational, achievement-based program that teaches physical education skills, math, science, geography and history through the sport of hockey. The program was designed to:

- Connect hockey to state and national education standards
- Integrate hockey into math, science, geography, history and physical education curricula
- Outline activities for hands-on application in the classroom
- Provide the rules and regulations for hockey
- Reward children for achievement

Atlanta has established nine goals through this program. Goals One through Four focus on physical education skills, techniques, strategies, rules, terminology and dynamics. Goals Five through Nine focus on the subjects of geography, math, history, physical science, geometry, measurement and statistics, and how each subject comes into play in the sport of ice hockey.

Atlanta has made the commitment to provide this program to over 800 schools across Georgia in its first season. Students completing all nine goals earn incentives, such as Thrashers merchandise, player appearances in a select number of schools, and even tickets to attend a Thrashers home game.

Of the two mutually beneficial programs, Minnesota names its “Grassroots

Hockey” program as its biggest community relations effort thus far. As mentioned before, the program is designed to educate and excite all Minnesotans on the sport of hockey.

As stated before, Columbus’ two biggest community relations efforts thus far have been its foundation and school program. The foundation is a grant-making public charity that orchestrates the team’s community development and fund-raising programs. “Major league sports franchises have very high profiles. With that comes civic responsibility...The Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation will use the unique resources at its disposal to improve the quality of life in Columbus and throughout Ohio by donating time, effort and financial support to various organizations,” Blue Jackets General Manager, Doug MacLean revealed at a March 2000 news conference.

Another undertaking is the “Stinger’s Go for the Goal” school program. This educational school program was created to send team mascot Stinger into area schools to teach kids the importance of making goals both on and off the ice. This interactive program uses a hockey theme to deliver a message that can be applied to everyday life. “The primary focus of the team’s mission statement is to be sensitive and responsive to the community it represents,” said Wendy Peterson, Executive Director of the Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation. “The team has been very active with Stinger’s Go for the Goal school program...we believe the foundation will enable us to further our off ice commitments.”¹¹⁴

Jenny Hannon, Director of Community Relations, states the Predator’s University as Nashville’s biggest community relations effort thus far. This online educational program is offered through the community relations department for fans wishing to receive a degree in Hockey 101. To further fans’ hockey education, labs - also called games - are held at the

¹¹⁴ www.bluejackets.com

Gaylord Entertainment Center 41 nights a year. The team encourages attendance at these labs and guarantees that in no time spectators will gain an understanding of the game of hockey and be a fan for life. In addition, the Nashville Predators offer courses taught by Professor Pete Weber, Predators' play-by-play broadcaster, and Professor Terry Crisp, Predators' color commentator. Advertised as more entertaining than one's favorite college or high school class, these classes give fans the chance to ask questions and to go into more detail about the intricacies of the game, including strategies and alignments. The classes are held at the Gaylord Entertainment Center before selected home games.¹¹⁵

After researching what the public relations staff of each team does to promote its product, the author attempted to gain a player's perspective of an expansion team. Accordingly, the author utilized interviews conducted with new players via Columbus' and Minnesota's web sites. The author had the opportunity to personally interview four players from Atlanta.

Recently signed Columbus Blue Jacket players Greg Gardner, Mathieu Darche, and Jonathan Schill discussed their expectations of this new team. "It's a great honor to be here right now. I am thrilled to be a part of this...I have high hopes for myself and this team," Gardner shares his thoughts at a recent news conference¹¹⁶. After looking at pictures of the Nationwide Arena on the Blue Jackets web site, Darche adds, "From what I've read, it's going to be one of the best venues in the NHL." Jonathan Schill adds, "This organization has some excellent hockey people. I think this situation is going to be very promising for the NHL."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ www.nashvillepredators.com

¹¹⁶ transcript of Columbus Blue Jackets May 16, 2000 news conference

¹¹⁷ transcript of Columbus Blue Jackets May 16, 2000 news conference

Ironically, the first player to be signed by the Minnesota Wild is Minnesota native, Steve Aronson. In a May 5, 2000 news conference Aronson shared his thoughts with the media. Being from the area, Aronson saw the arena being built and adds, “It was very exciting to see it, and I think the place is incredible. It’s going to have a tremendous atmosphere for hockey.”¹¹⁸

After this first season, four Atlanta Thrashers share their experiences with the author. “It’s been great and I’m happy playing here,” states Peter Buzek. Buzek adds, “We needed more wins, but this has been our first year so the players are learning how to play with each other and the front office staff has been learning how to work with the team.”¹¹⁹

Summing up his first NHL season, rookie Patrik Stefan states this year with the Thrashers has been, “exciting for me and also tough because this has been my first NHL season. But I’ve gained a lot of experience that I’ve learned from to take with me into next season.”¹²⁰

Fellow teammate Mike Stapleton adds that this inaugural season has been “an exciting, learning experience. Our team has been totally different from a team whose players have been together for a long time... everything we’ve done this season has been new, so that has made it exciting.”¹²¹ Mike Stapleton advises new teams to, “learn from other teams’ experiences. Go back to the first expansion team and see what they did and go from there.”¹²²

When asked his biggest surprise of this inaugural season, fellow teammate Johann Garpenlov states, “My biggest surprise is how well we’ve been treated by everybody. The

¹¹⁸ transcript of Minnesota Wild May 5, 2000 news conference

¹¹⁹ Peter Buzek interview, April 2000

¹²⁰ Patrik Stefan interview, April 2000

¹²¹ Mike Stapleton interview, April 2000

¹²² Ibid

media has also treated us well, and not been too hard on us when we've lost."¹²³ He adds when the team is losing the front office staff should, "have patience with your players, and know that each year builds for the future of the organization."¹²⁴

¹²³ Johann Garpenlov interview, April 2000

¹²⁴ Ibid

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Based on the results of the many interviews conducted with each team studied, the author drew the following conclusions

All teams target both male and female audiences from ages 18 to 50. Each team uses mass media outlets such as radio, television and billboards to reach its targeted audiences.

The public relations department of each team strives to create the image of a first-class franchise. To accomplish this, each team affords the media open access to both its players as well as front office personnel to create a feeling of accessibility. The degree of media accessibility is evaluated by measuring the quantity of press clippings and feedback from people in the media industry and individuals around the NHL.

Creating a positive image without players on the ice and maintaining that positive image once the season begins is a big challenge that each team faces. To meet this challenge, each public relations department works hand-in-hand with its marketing department. The public relations department of each team works with marketing to promote the positive image the organization strives for. Each team stresses that marketing and public relations must work together for the betterment of the organization. One-way of working well with one another is that the public relations department of each team is part of the overall decision-making process.

Each team agrees that the media are the most important audience and that good relationships with them are crucial for franchise success. Although they go about establishing relationships with the media differently, they all have worked hard at educating this audience on the fundamentals of hockey in order to have better coverage of the sport.

In addition to educating the media on hockey, each team has made a commitment to educating both its players and personnel on media relations. They emphasize the need for the front office and the players to be accessible and to know how to handle themselves when in the media spotlight.

Even though both players and staff are educated in media relations, not all the teams have an image crisis plan in writing. However, they are aware of the multiple crises that may and can occur during a season and they all have expressed the need to develop a written crisis plan.

Though no official plan is in writing to date, the hard work at establishing and maintaining good relationships with the media has paid off for each team. The trust level the teams have established with the media has helped promote each franchise.

In addition to benefiting from good media relations, each team has benefited from its commitment to bettering the surrounding community. They believe that every community relations project is both beneficial to the organization as well as its fans. Though the projects reviewed are team specific, they do share similarities. Such similarities that exist are the grant-making foundations and educational school programs.

The Internet is the most common communication medium used by each team to receive feedback. Each has dedicated a section within its official website for audience feedback.

After an in-depth study of Atlanta's, Minnesota's, Columbus' and Nashville's public, media, and community relations, the author concludes that maintaining positive relationships with all audiences, establishing accessibility, and creating a positive brand image spell success for each team.

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