Play to the Fans
Building Fan Support

PR: Indecent exposure?
Publicizing without incident
Diaries of a spin doctor
Objective
Armstrong had no control over what the media said about him. That's why people often view media buzz as more credible than other promotional messages. To encourage positive buzz, Armstrong's PR people pitched human-interest stories about him to journalists. Later, they quickly developed contingency plans to deal with the unfavorable messages.

In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, media attention helped Lance Armstrong build his reputation as a professional cyclist and increase awareness of his LIVESTRONG Foundation. However, when Armstrong confessed to using performance-enhancing drugs, most people began to view Armstrong in an unfavorable light.

A Lasting Impression
The media buzz about sports, events, athletes, and celebrities can create lasting impressions—both good and bad. Take Lance Armstrong, for example. Once, he was known as a hero who came back from battling cancer to win seven Tour de France bicycle races. The media attention he received increased public awareness of cycling and of his type of cancer, especially through the yellow LIVESTRONG wristbands. However, after he was accused of, and then confessed to, using performance-enhancing drugs, most people began to view Armstrong in an unfavorable light.

Suppose you are watching a much-anticipated music-awards event on television, and your favorite singer is performing. You're enjoying the show when suddenly, the unthinkable happens: A sound system failure reveals that the artist is actually lip-syncing the song. The horrified singer walks off the stage. Within seconds, the show goes to commercial break.

For weeks following the event, you see details of the star's humiliation in all the media. Disappointed fans write unfavorable letters and e-mails to her and to the event's sponsors. The singer goes on the talk-show circuit to make amends with the public. Fewer people buy her album, some radio stations quit playing her songs, and her deal as spokesperson for a major cosmetics company falls through.

We've all heard stories similar to this one. A certain image can make or break a person, an event, or an organization. The key to creating ongoing positive images and minimizing unflattering ones is to develop and implement proactive public-relations and publicity strategies. So, who develops these strategies? Let's find out.

Objectives
A Discuss the role of public relations and publicity in building fan support.
B Implement public-relations and publicity strategies to build and maintain fan support.

Armstrong had no control over what the media said about him. That's why people often view media buzz as more credible than other promotional messages. To encourage positive buzz, Armstrong's PR people pitched human-interest stories about him to journalists. Later, they quickly developed contingency plans to deal with the unfavorable messages.
From this example, you can see that publicity is generated in a variety of ways. Some of these ways include:

**Unexpected incidents.** “Wardrobe malfunctions,” street riots after a win, punches thrown by coaches, the untimely death of an athlete or celebrity, fights between players and fans, and unbelievable game-ending plays are all examples of unexpected incidents that create publicity.

**Personal behavior of a high-profile figure.** We watch public figures’ lives carefully. Some of these figures feel what they do is watched so carefully that it’s like being under a microscope. Any positive or negative behavior is likely to make headlines. Can you think of some examples?

**Special occasions.** Generally, these are planned or highly anticipated events that garner media attention. Watching Rory McIlroy sink a birdie putt to move into the number-one golfer position, participating in a fundraiser or charitable event, and attending an awards ceremony are just a few of the examples of special occasions when the media are out in force.

**Product or organizational changes/expansions.** When a player becomes a free agent, a franchise relocates to a different city, or a new facility opens, you know that something new or different is happening. These changes catch the media’s attention.

Where do sport/event marketers fit in?

**Publicity** (public exposure an organization doesn’t pay for) is an element of a public-relations strategy. Sport/Event marketers use PR to create and maintain a specific image about a person, event, or organization with the various publics or fans they encounter. Their goal is to support this desired image and to build goodwill with each of its fan bases.

Does a person or team have to be the biggest and best to attract fans? Hardly. The Green Bay Packers are consistently among the most profitable sport franchises, while playing in the NFL’s smallest market. To do this, the organization continuously works to build a positive relationship with its fans.

Fan support is essential to the success of any sport/event product. Without it, a performer’s popularity or an organization’s profitability will diminish. To withstand the test of time, sport/event marketers build strong relationships with fans by using well-planned public-relations strategies.

So, who are these fans? What do they expect in terms of attitude and performance?

Meet the fans

When you hear the word fan, you might think of a concert attendee or bowl-game spectator. But, an organization’s fan base goes far beyond the stands and into the general public. The various publics of a sport or event organization include the spectators, the business community, the local community, the media, and the organization’s employees. Let’s take a look at how these different fans influence the public-relations efforts of an organization.

**Spectators.** Spectators include the fans who attend concerts and events. They also follow certain performers’ careers, buy music and memorabilia, follow their favorite athletes and celebrities on social media, and join fan clubs. These fans are unique in that each of their experiences produces a variety of emotions and can create long-lasting memories.
Spectator fan support is driven by many factors including tradition, attitude, and performance. How did you become a fan of your favorite college or professional sport team? Maybe your Dad grew up in Pittsburgh and has followed the Steelers football team for as long as you can remember. And, now you are following in his footsteps by watching the team as often as you can on television. This is fan support driven by tradition.

Perhaps you admire the way a certain coach treats her players, and you agree with her philosophies. This is fan support driven by attitude. Suppose you follow Tiger Woods because of his incredible golf swing and his ability to win golf tournaments. This is fan support driven by performance.

Fans often feel a certain kind of prestige from being identified as a part of a certain group. Suppose your favorite basketball team is an underdog during the play-offs. The team overcomes many obstacles and surprises everyone by making it to the Final Four for the national championship. You might wear your team's colors with additional pride and feel a special bond with other fans as a result of the team's circumstances. Loyal spectator fans are unique individuals.

The business community. Whether it's the local hardware store owner or the executives of a multinational company, the business community is an important fan base for sport/event marketers. Event marketers depend on businesses to support their efforts. This includes everything from sponsoring Olympic athletes and building new arenas to supplying uniforms for the neighborhood Little League team. When considering this fan base, event marketers must make sure public-relations and publicity efforts complement and enhance the image of their sponsors.

Local business owners are also affected by events that occur around their businesses. Retailers might experience a higher volume of foot traffic and increased sales in their stores during a street festival in their area. When the National Hockey League owners initiated a lockout, many restaurants felt the aftershocks. Because spectators were not flocking to NHL arenas, they were not frequenting the local restaurants. Performance, or the lack of it, can influence a business owner's perspective about an individual or organization.

The community at large. Sport/Event marketers must work hard to reach out to those who may not necessarily attend their events. Cities, for example, often depend on public tax initiatives to build or maintain event and sport facilities. Without the support of the general public's tax revenue, communities have a difficult time competing for and attracting tourism dollars. These venues impact the economic health of a community and local businesses in job creation and consumer spending. In New York City, for example, the estimated impact of the sport industry is about $7 billion.

When a sport/event takes place locally, the community has a sense of pride and develops a sense of identification with that sport/event. The Indianapolis 500, the Kentucky Derby, and the Boston Marathon are a few examples of events that have become so permanently identified with a community that it is hard to think of one without the other.

Sport/Event marketers reach out to the community to reinforce their image. They often sponsor youth camps, charitable events, and meet-the-team days to keep their name before the public.

The media. For sport/event marketers, building a good relationship with the media is a must. Journalists, broadcasters, and publishers have the means to get a message out to
the masses. Sports/Events can benefit from the immense media coverage, as well as suffer from it when the news is not so good.

Offering hospitality to the media is a good practice because sport/event marketers are facilitating the media's work. That might include prime seating locations, computer hook-ups, food, phones, and adequate work space. They can also build trust and maintain goodwill with the media by holding press conferences, hosting media parties, giving interviews, and providing detailed press packets.

**Employees.** You might not think of employees as fans or publics, but believe it or not, they are. Intentional or not, employees have the ability to generate publicity about a performer, event, or organization just by talking with friends, family, and neighbors. In turn, these people have their own network of individuals in which to pass along a message. The manner in which information is presented and distributed to employees can greatly affect their attitudes and behavior after they leave the office each day. And, keep in mind that athletes are employees of a sport organization. Their actions and attitudes on and off the field can influence public perceptions about them as an individual as well as the organization they represent.

**Summary**

Fan loyalty is important to the sport/event product and is often driven by attitudes and performance. Sport/Event marketers use public relations and publicity to build and maintain fan loyalty by facilitating goodwill. Publicity is a nonpaid message and a component of the public-relations effort. Although the content of the publicity message cannot be controlled, sport/event marketers can “plant the seeds” to generate favorable publicity and devise contingency plans to handle unfavorable publicity. Fan bases, or publics, include spectators, the business community, the community favorable publicity and devise contingency plans to handle unfavorable publicity. Sage cannot be controlled, sport/event marketers can “plant the seeds” to generate a component of the public-relations effort. Although the content of the publicity message cannot be controlled, sport/event marketers can “plant the seeds” to generate favorable publicity and devise contingency plans to handle unfavorable publicity. Fan bases, or publics, include spectators, the business community, the community at large, the media, and an organization's employees.

**Components of a Press Kit**

- News releases
- Story suggestions: list of ideas/angles for journalists
- Biographical profile of performer(s) including statistical information
- Reprints of articles about the organization or performer(s)
- Quotations from notable sources about the organization or performer(s)
- Photographs (head shots and action shots)
- Video about organization or performer(s) for television broadcasters
- Audio sound bites for television or radio
- Fact sheets that include contact information (name, phone number)
- Game/Event program

**The Gray Zone**

How responsible should sport/event organizations, celebrities, and athletes be for keeping their various publics happy? We know that good publicity boosts goodwill and profits. But, should individuals have to keep their personal beliefs private so they won’t offend anyone? For example, some musicians may highlight their political views on stage at their concerts. Or, an athlete may make comments in an interview that could offend certain groups. Perhaps he’s an avid hunter, a hobby that some animal-rights activists would certainly not support. What do you think? Where should celebrities and athletes draw the line between building fan support and being true to themselves?
Plan the Work and Work the Plan

The tools that you use in your public-relations efforts will vary since each fan base has unique needs, preferences, and expectations. Your job is to know and understand these factors. Successful public-relations efforts include:

**Consistent reinforcement of a specific image over time.** Many businesses’ images and goals are based upon the organization’s mission statement. By focusing on the mission statement, you can work to make sure there are not any inconsistencies. Inconsistent messages can harm the overall image of an individual, event, or organization. Suppose that the goal of your event is to create awareness of and support for heart-disease research. You probably wouldn’t want to incorporate a pie- or French-fry-eating contest during the fundraiser!

**Two-way communication.** To know what your fans are thinking about your organization, you need to communicate with them. Two-way communication involves reaching out to each of your organization’s fan bases. It involves seeking input, listening actively, and expressing empathy.

**Promoting goodwill.** It’s all about consistently showing your publics that you really care about them and want to get along with them.

**Proactivity.** Being proactive means that you don’t sit back and wait for things to happen. You take initiative to inform your publics about interesting, newsworthy events and charitable acts as well as to clarify your position when something unfavorable happens.

**Counteractivity.** Be prepared for the unexpected and unwanted. To do this, you need to develop a contingency or crisis management plan. What would you do if word gets out that one of your organization’s coaches has violated NCAA rules? What if the high-profile celebrity who has signed to endorse your product says something insulting about fans during a speaking engagement? To minimize unfavorable publicity, you need to plan for such unfortunate incidents. Marketers shouldn’t ignore the situation and hope it just goes away—that could make a bad situation worse. By being prepared, you are better equipped to respond quickly and honestly.

**Investment of time, money, and personnel.** Although an organization doesn’t pay for publicity in the same way that it pays for an advertising spot on television or the radio, there are costs associated with it, as well as other public-relations activities. An organization pays someone to write the press release or to guide the facility tour. Postage to mail press kits, phone calls to media agents, and food served at an open house also require monetary investment.

---

**Crisis Management**

- Create a crisis-management team
- Establish crisis-control and notification procedures/policies
- Gather facts and assess the situation
- Establish the communication center and determine communication channels
- Develop message
- Select a spokesperson to deliver the message
- Respond to each question honestly
- Avoid off-the-record comments

---

**Stepping up to the plate**

Now that you know what factors influence the success of public-relations activities, let’s see how you can create and implement the appropriate strategies to gain and maintain fan support.

**Identify key organizational relationships.** Before you can develop a comprehensive public-relations plan, you need to develop a list of your various publics. We’ve discussed a few groups already (spectators, the business and residential communities, the media, and employees). However, in many organizations there are other groups that might have a special interest or bond to the organization. Alumni associations, boosters, and business sponsors are...
examples of groups with which college athletic organizations have ongoing relationships. They also have ties to regulatory bodies such as the NCAA. An event such as an annual golf tournament often depends on volunteers to keep the event going in a cost-efficient manner. And, some sport/event marketers are in regular contact with government officials to lobby for specific legislation that affects their organizations.

**Evaluate the characteristics of each relationship.** Each fan base has specific characteristics, viewpoints, and expectations in terms of your organization. Research is the key to understanding your many fan bases. Let’s take a look at some ways that sport/event marketers gather information about their fan bases.

Encourage an open dialogue with each one of your publics. Ask them what they think about various components of your product, organization, and performers. A powerful tool that you can use is the survey (online, direct mail, polls, and telephone). You might also provide fans with the opportunity to post their thoughts through social media. Conducting focus groups, reading incoming or fan mail, and networking with community leaders are also excellent ways to find out what everyone is really thinking.

Use research tools that are applicable for each of your publics. When conducting a survey, you probably won’t ask season ticket holders if the press box provides adequate work space. You might, however, ask them to rate the concessions or facility cleanliness.

**Analyze your current situation with each fan base.** Now that you have input from your fans, compile your research so you can see exactly where you stand with each of your publics. Determine your strengths with each fan base as well as your weaknesses. Perhaps spectators are satisfied with an arena’s seating and cleanliness. However, nearby businesses and homeowners are troubled by noise and traffic issues. The arena’s management team knows they are doing some things right but also know that they need to take steps to address problem areas.

**Create goals.** Goal setting is not an easy process. It includes establishing short- and long-term objectives for each one of your fan bases. When you establish your goals, you must consider many factors. Budget, personnel, regulations, and time constraints are important considerations, along with the overall image you want to present. Public-relations objectives should complement overall organizational goals.

Let’s go back to our arena example. What could the arena’s management team do to address traffic and noise issues? There may not be a quick fix, but there are things that they can do to promote goodwill with the local business community and homeowners. Perhaps they could plan a series of community meetings to discuss the problem. Or, they could plan to add another parking lot entrance to alleviate some of the traffic problems. By reaching out and making an honest effort to address its publics’ needs, the organization is sending a message that it is concerned about its relationship with each fan base.

**Select the appropriate tools/sources to communicate the PR and publicity message.** PR people have many tools that they can use to communicate publicity messages. The tools they use are highly dependent on the public to which they are appealing. For example, when distributing information about an award ceremony, an event marketer would format the information as a press release for the media. For sponsors or club members, the event marketer would format the information in a newsletter.

A Major League Baseball team might prepare press kits to distribute to national and local media outlets at the beginning of the season. Because of their unique technological capabilities, broadcast journalists might receive video footage of season highlights in their press kits.

To maintain a favorable image and gain ongoing community support, an organization might establish or support a foundation or program that benefits the community. For example, the Phoenix Suns franchise is actively involved in fundraising efforts through its Community Assist program. The program benefits organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Arizona Coalition for Military Families.
To maximize exposure, consider how to combine public-relations and publicity activities with other promotions. For example, a professional soccer team supports an organization that helps underprivileged children. The team's public-relations personnel work closely with the advertising and sales departments to create a tie-in promotional event. A sponsorship arrangement is created with a media outlet in which the media outlet provides free airtime to promote the event. The day of the event, the outlet is publicly recognized as the exclusive sponsor. The event itself might include free admission to the soccer game for children who bring gifts to donate to the charitable organization.

A combination of tools can be used to reach and influence each public:
- Newsletters
- Employee participation in charitable/educational programs
- Story ideas provided to media
- Public service announcements (PSAs)
- Television/Radio shows
- Foundation/Scholarship funding
- Unique events for special-interest groups
- Clinics/Workshops
- Audio-visual presentations
- Fan clubs
- Opt-in updates through social media
- Website news center
- Open houses or facility tours
- Sales promotion tie-ins
- Autograph/Picture sessions
- Speaking engagements
- News releases
- Press kits
- Press parties
- Exclusive interviews
- Press conferences
- Support of charitable events/cause

Implement your plan and disseminate information at the appropriate time. Goals and plans aren't worth much unless you take action. If you are planning a large event, you will have a lot to do to make sure that it runs smoothly. From deciding the menu and hiring a band, to securing a speaker and sending invitations, it is important to follow through and make sure everything that needs to happen, does happen. You can't mail invitations the day before a fundraiser and expect a huge turnout. Remember, it's all in the timing.

Measure, assess, and adapt on a regular basis. Measures of success can be obtained in a variety of ways, depending on your goals. You can often use the same tools that you used when you conducted your initial research, such as follow-up surveys or polls.

Tracking broadcast media exposures, clipping magazine and newspaper articles that mention your organization or event, and monitoring the number of hits on the website for a specific period of time are some ways to determine how well your public-relations activities have been received. Many businesses and organizations also monitor social media sites for mention of them or their efforts.

Let's not forget about talking. Talk to your employees and all of your fan bases on a regular basis to see what they think about the organization and its product. By taking initiative, listening, and exhibiting a sincere interest in your publics' opinions, your organization can gain and keep fans for life.

Summary
Public-relations tools and strategies vary among an organization's various fan bases (publics). The characteristics of successful public-relations and publicity plans include: the consistent reinforcement of a specific image over time; two-way communication; promotion of goodwill; proactive behavior; counteraction of negative publicity quickly and honestly; and an investment of time, money, and personnel. To create an effective public-relations plan, sport and event organizations need to identify key organizational relationships, evaluate the characteristics of each relationship through research, analyze the current situation among each of its publics, create goals for each public, select the appropriate tools to deliver the public-relations message, implement the plan, and review and revise the plan on a regular basis.

1. Identify the three factors that make each fan base unique.
2. Name the six characteristics of successful public-relations efforts.
3. Describe the seven steps sport/event marketers use to create and maintain favorable public relations.
4. List the five ways that sport/event marketers can gather information about their fans.
5. Identify seven tools that sport/event marketers use to reach and influence their various publics.
6. How do sport/event marketers measure the impact of public-relations messages?