



THE PUBLICITY CODE

In the age of the gagging order and Twitter scandal, the role of PR agents has never been more important. But is the service they provide up to scratch? **Owen Evans** examines how the practice of sports PR has developed over the years and speaks to editors, agents and clients about their experiences.

IT HAS NEVER BEEN more important to shout louder than your competitor.

To do that effectively you need a strong voice, or an expert who can shout for you. That is where the public relations (PR) expert steps in.

The "art" of PR can be described as managing communications as part of a business' policy-making and decision-taking, including the management of reputation, and in many cases, the promotion of positive news into the media. Ultimately, it is the management of a business' behaviour, and the perception of them in both the B2B and B2C environments.

The major story within the world of PR in the past year, just as in other sectors of the sports industry, has been how to react to, and work alongside, the exponential growth of social media. With sports stars, teams and major brands now communicating directly with their customers and fans through social media, is there a role for PR anymore?

No-one would go quite that far - but some commentators suggest that many of even the most-experienced practitioners still think brand awareness campaigns translate to sending a

press release out in a group e-mail and then disappearing to Starbucks for the afternoon.

"I think there are quite a few bad campaigns out there," says Scott Bowers, group director of communications at The Jockey Club - the largest commercial group in British horse racing. Bowers cut his teeth in PR at Manning Selvage and Lee (MS&L)'s corporate practice before being headhunted to join Weber Shandwick, where he and Fiona McLachlan set up the sports division.

"Some people think that just a flash or a logo can drive a brand," Bowers adds. "What is clear is that even if you are a huge company, you have to be smart when it comes to getting people to notice your product.

"One that sticks out in recent years was M&C Saatchi's work with [soft drink] Coke Zero and [footballer] Wayne Rooney. They looked at using Coca-Cola's relationship with Rooney as a brand opportunity.

"Instead of, for instance, just setting up a Sunday interview in The Times newspaper, they got more creative. As a way of promoting Coke Zero, M&C Saatchi proposed the idea of a TV

"Public relations practitioners who best understand this evolving dynamic will be the leaders in their industry - be it in the US or globally."

Magnay adds that accessibility is the deal-breaker she looks for when any PR agent approaches her: "A big push from the PR company involved with London 2012 was to try and get some publicity about the ticket sales but they did that by offering sports we could access anyway.

"They were not giving us anything that we could not already get. Then they were insisting on boiler plate acknowledgements for providing access to information we could already get and that we did not want.

"For me that was really bad PR because they were making quite strong demands for something that we would do a better and quicker and easier job of accessing ourselves."

Balance of Power

In the past 12 months or so we have seen the rise of sports stars dictating editors' news agendas through 'super injunctions' and copy control. The ball, therefore, is in the court of PR agents representing their clients, becoming more powerful than ever before. But are they using this influence wisely?

"One of the biggest challenges in sport today, quite apart from the gagging orders that are being reported on at the moment, is the mere fact that an agent can dictate the terms of an interview, as well as proofread the copy, then give a pay-offline for their client before it goes out in the national newspapers," says John Collard, chief executive of sports PR specialists Sports Impact who boasts 20 years experience in the PR industry.

"I think is a tragedy. Five years ago you would not have got a newspaper to have agreed to a brand having its logo on the same page as an interview nevermind sponsoring the copy, as it were. It is a sign of the times in the sense of the newspaper industry seeing sales fall to the extent that they have and needing the revenue stream • and now looking to find that revenue on websites.

"But the mere fact that they have succumbed to that, and the highest-paid footballers in the land can dictate what is written about them, I think is a bad sign for the industry and also saying a lot about the lack of calibre of the PR person who has intervened.

"A PR should have been telling its client that sort of attitude would not benefit them in the long-term. I think there probably will be a change in the future, with the power of the courts now suggesting it is going to be the superstars who decide how they are going to be presented.

"It is shocking to think how much the national newspapers will now allow this sort of situation to develop. To a point where you actually wonder whether it is worth reading the papers."

This point is endorsed by sports editor at The Times, Tim Hallissey: "PR agents definitely know how much power they have now. It is different to how it was a few years ago.

"Copy control is simply not an issue for us as we do not entertain it. In much the same way that we don't pay for interviews. However, that doesn't mean that PR agents don't ask for copy control. In fact I think they ask for it most of the time. Sadly that is just the way the industry is currently."

Hallissey says the balancing act for an editor now is to find the acceptable line between a PR agents' demands and maintaining editorial integrity for readers: "What I look for is an agent to come to us and say 'we can give you three-quarters of an hour with [footballer] Rio Ferdinand' ahead of a big match.

"It gives us exclusive copy that could make an interesting feature for our readers. If it means that I have to include a line in there somewhere saying 'Rio wears such and such' then that is what I am going to do. The reality is if I don't take up this offer then we'll get left behind and someone else will get the opportunity.

"You have to be careful though. Our readers are a pretty smart bunch and they are happy to tell us if we overstep the mark. I remember a couple of years ago when we did an interview with one of England's leading footballers. In hindsight we probably were a little too heavy with the sponsor details in the story and our readers absolutely slaughtered us.

"They instinctively know if there is too much advertising in a piece. And they wasted no time telling us."

The Blame Game

For a successful PR campaign, it is imperative for client and agent to work hand-in-hand. If the campaign fails to raise awareness, is it not fair to assume those in charge of communications to carry the can?

Not so, according to HSBC's group head of sponsorship Giles Morgan: "Most people think that when a publicity campaign does not work, it is the fault of the PR agent.

"However, usually it's because the client hasn't been sure of the message he wants to put forward in the first place. If the client or sponsor does not know exactly what brand message they want to promote, it's so much harder for the PR agent."

Coke Zero and Wayne Rooney: innovative PR campaign - *MaiC Saatchi*

programme, which would be targeting the same specific audience as their product."

'Wayne Rooney's Street Striker' was born. Coke Zero's target audience was handed a show that Sky i, UK pay-broadcaster BSkyB's flagship entertainment channel, were happy to pay to produce due to the alliance with the England striker.

Unfortunately the innovation of M&C Saatchi is not the norm, and The Daily Telegraph's Olympics Editor Jacquelin Magnay issues a stark warning to PR agents that actually it has never been easier to ignore a poor PR campaign: "It is really about having a personalised approach and getting to know key journalists.

"I'm looking at my e-mails and I got over three hundred today [by lunchtime]. Probably about 50 per cent were from PR agencies. In the old days you would get them by fax and throw them in the bin. So with e-mails you don't even go past the subject header.

"For something that is important personal contact is imperative. Get on the phone and talk to someone instead of having a chain of e-mails trying to set something up."



@SportBusiness What have been the best and worst sports PR campaigns of 2011?



@Prof_Chadwick Ongoing PR mess rather than one that is specific to 2011: Tiger Woods. Is there a strategy? If so, what is it? What's the positioning? Who are the targets? What's the message? Is it a re-brand? Is it a re-launch? In my opinion, at best a muddle; at worst, a shambles, an excellent example of how not to manage PR. Woods' Twitter strategy is clear evidence to show absence of strategic thinking: silence, followed by silence, followed by flurry of irrelevance, followed by silence



@RaymondBoyle67 Best: ECB's use of social media around the Ashes. Worst: FIFA's continual misunderstanding of social media



@ScottBowers Moments rather than the campaign, but Samsung and Becks launch woeful. So too London 2012 Countdown Clock with Omega, not for glitch issue but for total unoriginality (clock and an athlete). Best: Jaguar activating their sports properties, including England cricket work, and back end of last year is of course horse racing getting behind its man: AP McCoy winning BBC Sports Personality of the Year



@synergytim Worst: BOA (Omega close second). Best - apart from all our clients obviously - LOCOG's London 2012 ticket campaign



@BrianGainor Worst Sports PR Stories of '11: NFL Lockout, Bahrain F1, BOA-LOCOG, Fiesta Bowl, Manny Ramirez/ Barry Bonds, Tresselt/OSU Best Sports PR Stories of '11: Pacquiao, Trevor Bayne/ Daytona, Blake Griffin-NBA All-Star, Cricket World Cup, Miami Heat

Morgan also highlights the need of clients to get across a brand message through publicity campaigns, rather than just raising general awareness: "Our primary sponsorships are not about brand awareness per se because people are aware of our brand anyway in key markets.

"So within the media landscape our main objective is to communicate our key messages. Therefore, the role of a PR agency or a media specialist is to make sure that key messages are driven.

"Our sports sponsorships are currently golf and rugby and what we are trying to do is take them to new and emerging markets to help growth.

"Why? Because that is a direct metaphor for HSBC as a global organisation which specialises in emerging markets and capitalises on growth. And therefore supporting golf and rugby is important because, like HSBC, there is plenty of heritage and plenty of history. We are 147 years old.

"Both golf and rugby have become Olympic sports for the Rio 2016 Games, and therefore both sports have to reach out to new markets around the world. That's the point of the Olympics, and being part of the Olympic family. So you can see for us there is a major correlation between HSBC, a major international business, and emerging markets - aligning with two sports which also need to grow and go into new markets.

"There is a very clear business or brand message there as well. Obviously this is the major role of the PR agent from a client's point of view."

Morals or Money?

Labour disputes and globalising the appeal of US sports are the two major items on the agenda for American PR specialists right now.

Bryan Harris, chief operating officer for New York-based Taylor Strategy, feels his counterparts should be more morally responsible in how they portray their clients in the current war of words between sports stars and regulators: "Labour conflicts between management and athletes are not uncommon in the US.

"Currently, the NFL [National Football League] and NBA [National Basketball Association] are engaged in highly-contentious labour disputes. It is common, in these scenarios, for management and labour to wage an intense public relations battle to gain the upper-hand in the court of public opinion.

"This is a rather dubious approach. Fans tend not to take sides in such disputes and really do not care about the complex legal ramifications. They just want matters settled and for the game to be contested uninterrupted.

"For labour and management to engage in such an antagonistic and aggressive war of words is counter-intuitive and reflects negatively on the league and its athletes. They have a responsibility to inform the media and public on the progress [or lack thereof] of labour negotiations, but their approach should be more tempered and balanced

for the good of the sport."

Harris does, however, feel there have been quite a few success stories in American PR, praising the way specialists have used campaigns to capitalise, for example, on the growing Hispanic community by increasing the profile of sports like football and boxing.

He highlights the loyal fanbase created around Major League Soccer side Seattle Sounders, which has grown dramatically since its revamp in 2009, averaging more than 30,000 fans per match.

Harris also picks out the way that NFL stars have aggressively built up social media profiles through Twitter and Facebook.

Greater emphasis on PR

Now that many newspapers in the States can no longer afford to have a team of reporters follow one team all around America, Harris believes the role of the PR agent becomes takes on even greater emphasis.

"The role and influence that print plays in engaging fans with teams, athletes and sports properties has been diminishing in recent years and will continue to diminish," he says.

"This has less to do with economic factors and more to do with the growing and

Publicity campaigns vital to HSBC's brand strategy - Getty Images Sport



diversifying role that digital plays in enhancing the fan experience. PR is in the best position among all the marketing communications disciplines to leverage social media and digital strategies to engage consumers - be it in the sports, entertainment, or lifestyle space.

"SpQrts properties, corporate sponsors, and athletes have become increasingly creative and sophisticated in engaging with fans via digital. Public relations practitioners who best understand this evolving dynamic will be the leaders in their industry - be it in the US or globally."

Linda Fulford, managing director of Fulford Public Relations, has been working with sports PR in Singapore since 1998. The agency was formed after securing work for West and Davidoff cigarettes with the McClaren Formula One team and golfs Asian PGA Tour.

"Sport has really only taken off in Singapore over the past few years primarily because the Singapore government has made it an important agenda item for development and growth," she says.

At the moment Fulford are the stand alone sports PR specialists in the Singapore market, and are hoping to capitalise on that

position ahead of the Singapore Sports Hub's completion in 2014.

"The scene will inevitably become more competitive especially with the forthcoming Singapore Sports Hub, which has engaged us right up to its opening.

"This will allow for major international sports events to be held at the new stadium and provide significant opportunities for the local sports associations, athletes and the general community to get involved. PR will therefore be an important factor to building awareness across the region and internationally."

Editorial or Advertorial?

If PR agents are more powerful than ever, have they become more important to editors than their own reporters?

"I would like to think that my journalists would be a little bit more resourceful and find another way to get the story, rather than just being fed by the PR agent," says Tim Hallissey.

Sports Impact's Collard argues, however, that PRs are under more pressure to prove their value in the current media landscape, and the quality of journalism would decline if there were no PR agents.

"I think it would result in journalist writing not as good a copy as they would with PR agents," he says. "Some of the best writers in the whole of Fleet Street are working exclusively on sport.

"They are liaising with good people to get material and use it properly. But there are - without question - practitioners out there who are not up to the mark and writing lots of dud material, and material that quite frankly shouldn't be out there.

"I go back to this point about managing expectations. If a client believes they can manage expectations and deal directly with the media, then it wouldn't take them long to realise it was a full-time job.

"To do it properly - being reactive and proactive in the right way - demands a lot of different skills. So hopefully we demonstrate that because most of our clients go back several years. The best journalists will do all their own writing and most of their own research.

"But there is no doubt that some of their work has only come about because good PR people are doing their job too and also managing to persuade a client to release an angle when perhaps they would not want to."



Anúncio

With international sports stars now speaking directly to fans and journalists via the phenomenon of social media, will Twitter and Facebook ring the death knell for PR agencies in the sports industry? If not, how can they exploit it to their advantage?

JOHN COLLARD, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SPORTS IMPACT



"It's an interesting point and something we are constantly adapting to.

"Funnily enough we have been asked by Wilson to look after that kind of thing (social media) with Pdraig Harrington and work on it for them.

"Effectively it is to represent their golf across Europe and look after their Tour players.

"We are likely to be doing it by working with their Tour manager and also the players' caddies to get an insight into information that would be of interest to the average golf fan.

"My job effectively is that if Wilson wants to profile Pdraig Harrington ahead of the Open to the media, I find a platform for him to do that which isn't the same as last year.

"I have to find something that is newsworthy and has news value to them. Just as the national sports editors are devoting more and more time to their websites as well as their newspapers, so too we have to adapt to the change in the communication channels.

"Social media is becoming increasingly important as that is where the younger audience is focusing their attention and you ignore them at your peril. It's only as good as the content you put on it. In the same way that we are asked to constantly update the Boat Race's website, to constantly refresh it and add more value, the same principle applies to what we will do with Wilson and their social media strategy.

"It has to be quality content. I would apply the same principle as with press releases: it doesn't go out unless we believe it to be interesting to ourselves and it stands up."

MATT BOURN, MANAGING DIRECTOR, BRABEN



"The short answer is no. But then we're PR specialists in the sport, media and digital world so you could argue we would say that, wouldn't we!

"So, let's refer you to Australia's cricketing legend Ricky Ponting who said 'It is your job as international players to promote the game and be the best you can for the game. And if we can use social networks, if that brings people closer to the game, brings people through the gates to play, then that's what it is all about...'

"Precisely, Ricky, we concur. But the use of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook alone do not achieve these aims, they have to be fully integrated into a communications campaign.

"Which is where we as PR agents practice, delivering campaigns which embrace all the available channels available to communicate with target audiences, whether digital, print, broadcast or face-to-face.

"Everything a sports star produces is 'content' for media to report - this content can work for or against a PR campaign and your business objectives depending on how and when it is released.

"Despite everything you read, Twitter and Facebook are not the only social media platforms out there... take a look at up-and-comers like Foursquare and the UK-based 'YouTube of Sound' Audioboo, and the biggest of all, YouTube itself. And there's LinkedIn to consider if you're targeting an audience in a business environment

"So, in summary, all good PRs will be encouraging sports businesses and their talent to embrace the social networks as part of integrated PR campaigns.

"The best PRs are ones that are actively playing a role 24/7 in the roll-out of activity in these channels alongside everything else.

"They will be operating across the sectors of sport, media, digital, marketing and licensing to harness all the powerful opportunities this brings."

NIGEL CURRIE, DIRECTOR, BRANDRAPPORT



"Most definitely not.

"Generally the increase in international athletes using social media, in particular Twitter, is great news for sports PR agencies. In fact, it is a terrific additional tool for PR agencies to exploit.

"A well-known sports star with a significant following on Twitter offers sports PR agencies another communications channel to talk directly to consumers and the media about a particular sponsor's campaign.

"Athletes can help drive awareness of campaigns and brand messaging in a number of ways - such as driving traffic to websites or football to events, help seed videos, promoting and endorsing products, help form opinion, as well as being a great tool to use for crisis communications.

"Having said that, though, Twitter users are a savvy lot and there is a fine line between success and failure.

"If followers think an athlete's account is just a mouth piece for a sponsor, then criticism can follow - which is not ideal for either athlete or sponsor.

"It is also worth noting that there are a significant number of well-known sports stars not using Twitter and some who never will, so it can never fully replace the role of the PR agency.

"Also the massive potential for an unedited, unchecked message to be sent will always make it a more risky way of reaching an audience.

"Finally, 140 characters isn't a lot to get a message across. At present it is a way of delivering a short statement with limited detail.

"Detailed information is what the public want and as such it can't take the place of, or replace, a feature in a newspaper or an interview with a broadcaster."

JON TIBBS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, JON TIBBS ASSOCIATES



"If you had told me three years ago that Manchester United's Facebook following would number the same as the population of Greater London, I would have questioned your sanity.

"If you had added that top journalists and iconic sports stars would be taking to Twitter in a non-stop cycle of debate, conjecture and revelation - all firmly in the glare of the public spotlight - I'd have called you a lunatic.

"But now, digital immigrant that I am, there is no doubt in my mind that social media is an ever-more essential tool for any PR agency ready to take it seriously; and a communications Bermuda Triangle for those that are not.

"Of course, there is still no substitute for personal relationships forged with time and trust.

"But I would defy any PR agent not to feel a rush of excitement as you watch issues with huge global ramifications unfold, mutate and multiply 140 characters at a time.

"The social media phenomenon offers a new set of challenges by putting clients in direct contact with journalists and the fans.

"But let's not forget, it is those same flag-waving, ticket-buying fans who made the global sports business what it is today. For them, this genuine, personal connection with their idols is a welcome and deserved antidote to an industry often accused of being out of touch.

"There has been the odd, high-profile Twitter casualty, but these have just underlined the importance of making social media an integral part of your communications strategy.

"While it may necessitate a new breed of specialised media training, aimed at each and every phone-toting client representative, the rewards can be enormous.

"Rio Ferdinand has proved that it is possible to stay on message whilst delivering real insight to an avid audience of loyal consumers - 900,000 followers can't all be wrong."