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A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS
FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

By

Joseph T. Cranston

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Program of Rowan University
June 1, 2000

Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved 6-1-00

ABSTRACT

Cranston, Joseph T. A Guide to Effective Public Relations for the High School Athletic Director, 2000, Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin, Public Relations

The primary purpose of this research project was to develop a handbook for high school athletic directors so they can apply effective public relations practices to their athletic program on a daily basis. Fifteen high school athletic directors from different counties in New Jersey were interviewed to gain first-hand knowledge of the athletic public relations activities that are most effective. A review of several sources, including physical education and administration books, athletic journals and public relations books, supplemented the primary research by providing supporting research by some of the most well-respected public relations practitioners in the athletic arena.

The finished handbook combines public relations practices used in the field with theoretical practices written in texts and publications to produce a manual all high school athletic directors can consult for new or improved public relations activities.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Cranston, Joseph T. A Guide to Effective Public Relations for the High School Athletic Director, 2000, Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Bagin, Public Relations.

The most effective public relations practices used by high school athletic directors in New Jersey - in conjunction with an examination of written materials on the subject - were examined and synthesized to produce a guidebook all athletic directors can consult to implement new public relations ideas or improve existing practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgments	
Chapter One -- Introduction	1-4
Statement of Problem	4-5
Purpose of Study	5-6
Importance of Study	6-7
Key Terms and Definitions	7-8
Assumptions and Limitations	8-9
Procedures	9
Chapter Two -- Overview of Related Research and Literature	10-11
Purpose of School Public Relations	11
Purpose of Athletic Public Relations	11-12
Responsibility of Athletic Director	12-14
Goals and Objectives	14-16
Building Relationships with Key Publics	16-20
Crisis Management	20-22
Publicity	22-23
Media Relations	23-26
Image	27
Evaluation of the Program	28-30
Chapter Three -- Methodology	31-33
Chapter Four -- Handbook	34-60
Evaluation	61-62
Recommendations	63
Appendix	
Bibliography	

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Chapter One

Introduction

Robert L. Purdy, in his book, The Successful High School Athletic Program, evaluates the awesome impact athletic public relations can have on a school:

“The strength and weakness characterized by the athletic program goes a long way in helping to determine the kind of school that we have. The spirit, enthusiasm and attitude of the student body and community carries over into other activities and into the curriculum as well. Success and failure are both very contagious.”¹

The leadership of the athletic public relations program for any high school lies in the hands of the athletic director. The athletic director, then, must develop a clear understanding of public relations activities that can positively or negatively influence the program. By doing so, the athletic director can be the focal point in promoting and publicizing the school and athletic program to the public.

Effectively communicating with the public on varying levels is the cornerstone of a prosperous athletic program. John Gardi, athletic director at Lacey Township (NJ) High School for the past 19 years, says, “athletic directors need a combination of education, personal experience and mentoring from other athletic directors to truly become successful communicators.”²

¹ Robert L. Purdy, The Successful High School Athletic Program (West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing, 1973), 58.

² John Gardi. Personal interview, November 9, 1999.

Building relationships is a key component in creating an effective athletic public relations program. The athletic director must institute and maintain relations with the community, coaches, parents, teachers and numerous other publics to gain support for athletics. Each group is an integral piece to the continued success of any athletic program and school.

At a recent workshop, The National Association of Interscholastic Athletic Administrators stated that an effective, ongoing public relations program must be established and consistently maintained. Good publicity and promotion provide the cornerstone for a successful interscholastic athletic program. Athletic directors are responsible for the overall success; therefore, they must have a keen understanding of who the supporters are and what will encourage them to make a supportive response. Total involvement is a must!³

Now, more than ever, high school athletic directors are faced with not only producing quality athletic programs and student athletes, but also maintaining an effective public relations and image program. Moreover, perception of an athletic department often dictates the overall image of the school.

“For many citizens, the only contact with the school is through the athletic teams. These citizens may know very little about the school’s instructional

³ National Association of Interscholastic Athletic Administrators.

program because the American tradition has been to highlight the school through its athletic teams.”⁴

James Mills, second-year athletic director at Burlington Township (NJ) High School, agrees by saying, “At many high schools, athletic teams are the most visible aspect of school life. The athletic program’s image often defines the school’s image.”⁵

The high school athletic director must maintain open, two-way communication with the public at all times while providing supervision for the athletic public relations program.

According to Clayne Jensen, in his book, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, an effective public relations program can be surprisingly simple.

“It need not contain “show business,” gimmicks, or dramatic events. It can be well planned, normal, ongoing exchange of useful information between school employees, students, and members of the public. It should be a naturally integrated part of the school’s public relations effort.”⁶

As a result, the development and maintenance of effective public relations are essential for the continued success of high school athletics. In addition, the responsibility of the athletic public relations program is a team effort, but the

⁴ Donald R. Gallagher, Don Bagin, and Leslie Kindred, The School and Community Relations, Sixth Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 301.

⁵ James Mills. Personal interview, November 9, 1999.

⁶ Clayne R. Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1988), 153.

athletic director must provide the leadership and guidance for the program to thrive.

Statement of Problem

For many high school athletic directors, establishing and maintaining an effective athletic public relations program is often a monumental assignment. With budgets and resources stretched to the limit, athletic public relations programs often take a back seat to other pressing issues such as scheduling, finance and administrative tasks.

Since a high school athletic public relations program encompasses a wide-array of disciplines -- each needing special attention -- inexperienced athletic directors often face an uphill battle. An experienced high school athletic director may have already incorporated public relations activities into the school's overall public relations plan. However, for many new and unpracticed athletic directors, learning to interact and build relationships with each public takes time and considerable effort. As a result, establishing a practical public relations program can be a difficult task.

Often, novice high school athletic directors have little or limited training concerning athletic public relations. Many have public relations experience as a teacher, coach or counselor, but athletic public relations involves different levels of expertise. Moreover, much of the literature and related research pertaining to

athletic public relations is outdated or confined to a few pages in a physical education book.

Charles Earling, who served as athletic director at Washington Township (NJ) High School for 27 years and who is currently a high school principal, believes most high school athletic directors are aware of how important public relations is to the school and athletic program. However, knowing where to obtain the most up-to-date information is often a trying experience because it is scattered in numerous resources.⁷

Typically, athletic directors are accustomed to consulting a mentor for effective public relations ideas and activities, but this does not rule out the need for a public relations manual. Craig Cicardo, athletic director at Mater Dei (NJ) High School, believes that talking to fellow athletic directors about their successes and failures in public relations is the best resource. But, he adds that a handbook would be a good reference for athletic directors to consult for proven public relations activities.⁸

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine different public relations practices used by high school athletic directors and review related literature to create a usable public relations handbook for high school athletic directors.

⁷ Charles Earling. Personal interview, November 5, 1999.

⁸ Craig Cicardo. Personal interview, November 8, 1999.

Today, with so much emphasis placed on image and effective communication, the novice, as well as the experienced athletic director, could consult this resource to find new and creative ways to enhance the athletic public relations program.

Importance of Study

The importance of this study is to create a functional and contemporary public relations handbook for high school athletic directors. Information on athletic public relations is available, but often fragmented between different sources such as books or workshops. By bringing together a complete analysis of public relations practices, high school athletic directors can spend more time implementing public relations programs rather than searching for ideas in a multi-subject text on athletics.

Edward Hill, athletic director at Collingswood (NJ) High School, is not aware of a quality resource solely dedicated to athletic public relations, but he notes, “a guidebook would be a valuable resource for any athletic director trying to build and maintain relationships with the public.”⁹

James Mills also believes a guidebook would benefit unseasoned high school athletic directors. According to Mills, “A public relations handbook would be a useful source because it will simplify the public relations process for

⁹ Edward Hill. Personal interview, November 5, 1999.

many new athletic directors. An athletic director could consult one reference to obtain a variety of public relations activities.”¹⁰

This handbook will not only provide a guide to valuable public relations activities, but also provide current communication ideas that can help improve interaction between the athletic director and public. Earling states, “A public relations handbook would be an excellent tool for high school athletic directors. Communication is imperative, and athletic directors need to utilize advances in technology and communication in order to develop an effective public relations program for the school.”¹¹

Key Terms and Definitions

Attitude – The composition of a person’s bent on any issue or question, made up from all the influences that have built up throughout a lifetime.

Audience – Denotes the group or groups, at whom the public relations program or any part thereof, is directed.

Briefing Book – A written outline of important aspects of the athletic program including contacts, phone numbers, directions, and highlights.

Campaign – An organized effort to poll, formulate, or alter the opinion of any groups on a selected subject.

Community – A group of people consisting of various publics living in the same locality.

¹⁰ James Mills. Personal interview, November 9, 1999.

¹¹ Charles Earling. Personal interview, November 5, 1999.

Crisis Management – Planning before and after potential occurrences. Containing an incident that occurs out of control to limit its effects.

Image – The subconscious impression a person has of an organization, institution, or person.

Issue – A matter that causes concern to an organization.

Media – Avenues through which public relations messages are transmitted. Common athletic media include newspapers, radio, television, brochures, and magazines.

News Release – A manuscript prepared for distribution to the press or broadcast media.

Opinion - A person's view on an issue or subject as he or she articulates it.

Promotion – Special activities designed and intended to create and stimulate interest in a person, product, organization, or cause.

Public (plural, publics) – Any group of individuals that a public relations program seeks to influence.

Public Relations – A management function, including counseling, enabling organizations to achieve relationships with their various audiences through an understanding of audience opinions, attitudes and values.

Publicity – Information supplied to a news medium without cost.

School Public Relations – Process of communication between the school and community to increase citizen understanding of educational needs and practices and encouraging intelligent interest and cooperation with the intent of improving the school.

Assumptions and Limitations

The author will interview athletic directors from public and private high schools in the state of New Jersey only.

In addition, the majority of athletic directors interviewed by the author and cited in related research take on the responsibility of athletic public relations for their school. However, in certain instances, public relations activities are handled through a district's public information or school administration office. Unless noted, the school's athletic director assumes accountability.

Procedures

To create a usable public relations handbook, a clear understanding of public relations practices used by high school athletic directors is necessary. First, the author reviewed current books, magazines and journals to obtain related research.

Second, the author interviewed 15 high school athletic directors representing 14 of the 21 counties throughout the state of New Jersey for first-hand information. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the telephone. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.

By reviewing pertinent literature on the subject and interviewing professionals in the field, the author determined which public relations practices high school athletic directors use most successfully. As a result, by coming to a consensus on successful public relations activities, the author created an effective public relations instruction book for novice and experienced high school athletic directors.

Chapter Two

Overview of Related Research and Literature

The author used Rowan University's Library to perform a review of related research and literature. Selected databases including Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, Virtual Academic Library Environment of New Jersey (ABI-INFORM – Business and Periodical Abstracts), Wilson Business Abstract (1995-99), and Rowan's electronic catalog system were used to obtain related research and literature.

The need for good public relations is evident in all aspects of high school athletics. "The promotion of positive relationships with young athletes, school personnel, and the parent community is the biggest and most important step in developing effective public relations."¹ Koehler and Giebel, in their book, Athletic Director's Survival Guide, break down athletic public relations into four easy steps. "One: Do something good. Two: Tell everybody. Three: Tell everybody. Four: Tell everybody."² Doing something good is the easy part; effectively relaying the message to the public is more difficult.

David Hoch cites two common axioms that should guide the high school athletic public relations effort. Athletic directors need to always put their best foot

¹ Mike Koehler & Nancy Giebel, Athletic Director's Survival Guide (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1997), 76.

² Ibid, 76.

forward to accentuate the positives while realizing that first impressions do count. Effective public relations is not a frill or luxury. It is a must!³

Purpose of School Public Relations

Before a high school athletic public relations program can be evaluated, a clear purpose needs to be established. A keen understanding of school public relations is necessary for all athletic directors. Edward L. Bernays, one of the most influential public relations practitioners of our time, lists three elements in his definition of school public relations. School public relations should provide information for public consumption; attempt to modify the attitudes and actions of the public through persuasion; and attempt to integrate the attitudes and actions of the public and of the organization or people who are conducting the public relations program.⁴

Purpose of Athletic Public Relations

Bernays' ideology sets the stage to explore the purpose of athletic public relations in the framework of the overall school public relations program. Charles Bucher, in his book, Administration of Physical Education & Athletic Programs,

³ David Hoch, Handling the "PR", Coach and Athletic Director, v68n8, Mar. 1999, 4-6.

⁴ Charles A. Bucher, Administration of Physical Education and Athletic Programs (St. Louis: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1983), 576.

cites four purposes of athletic public relations. First, athletic directors provide public information concerning athletic events. Second, they gather support for athletic funding. Third, they strive to improve communication between students, teachers, parents and community members. Lastly, and most importantly, they correct misunderstanding and misinformation concerning the aims and objectives of the athletic program.⁵

Whether the athletic director wants to promote a team, host a special event, or deflect a crisis situation, a clear purpose must be defined. A vague public relations program will not only hurt the athletic program, but possibly the entire school.

Responsibility of Athletic Director

Today, with so much emphasis placed on producing stellar athletic programs, many athletic directors receive unmerited scrutiny and criticism. Since the department is often placed under a microscope, the athletic director must provide guidance for the entire public relations program. The entire school staff must understand the goals and objectives set down by the athletic director.

"Because athletic directors have frequent contact with a range of people inside and outside the building, their primary job is to serve as advocates of the total athletic program and to share realities with significant persons in the school

⁵ Ibid, 576.

and community."⁶ These realities - including clear goals and objectives - play a major role in the overall public relations program for the athletic department.

Harold J. Vanderzwaag states, "Even though the entire staff is involved with public relations, the athletic director holds prime responsibility for what is done in this regard."⁷ Robert Bronzan concurs by saying, "the director of athletics cannot assign responsibility for the public relations program to anyone else; he may delegate certain functions and duties to other staff members, but ultimate responsibility lies with the director."⁸

By serving as leader of the athletic public relations effort, the athletic director can involve the entire school in effectively promoting the athletic department. "The better the employees are informed about matters of particular interest in public relations, the better prepared they are to give accurate information and to foster a positive image of the school. Well-informed employees can be a great asset."⁹

Athletic directors need to be aware of how valuable school employees can be to the overall athletic public relations effort. Since teachers consistently interact with students, parents and the community, their influence as key

⁶ Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Director's Survival Guide, 77.

⁷ Harold J. Vanderzwaag, Sports Management in Schools and Colleges (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984), 118.

⁸ Robert T. Bronzan, Public Relations, Promotions and Fundraising for Athletic and Physical Education Programs (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), 77-78.

⁹ Clayne R. Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1988), 156.

communicators can go a long way in promoting an athletic public relations program.

However, a problem arises when an athletic director does not have full control of the public relations activities involving the athletic program. For example, if individual coaches handle the public relations events for their respective sports without the guidance of the athletic director, inconsistencies will emerge that could negatively affect the program.

To avoid confusion, the responsibility of public relations practices should be clearly defined between the athletic director and coaches. Bronzan states, “The common error – and one to be avoided at all times – is to make public relations activities, other than personal actions, the responsibility of a coach in each sport.”¹⁰

If boundaries are not clearly defined for the public relations activities, confusion and conflict may arise in the department. Ultimately, the public relations program will suffer.

Goals and Objectives

“Interscholar athletics are generally considered an integral part of the total educational process, which has as its aim the development of physically, mentally socially, and morally fit individuals. Athletics can serve as a vital educational

¹⁰ Bonzan, *Public Relations, Promotions and Fundraising for Athletic and Physical Education Programs*, 78.

training ground.”¹¹ Assisting student-athletes in their development must be a high priority for any athletic director. Effectively using public relations techniques can help this objective.

Often, athletic directors work in conjunction with school administrators to assemble a plan that meets the goals and objectives of the school. “The public relations program should be clearly defined, including purposes, procedures, responsibilities and expected results. The better the program is understood, the better chances it has for success.”¹²

Public relations programs as a whole usually have established goals. These goals should include: “two-way communication, mutual understanding between the organization and its publics, public acceptance of the organization.”¹³

Establishing a public relations program for the athletic department is the first step. Next, the information needs to be disseminated to the staff. According to Bronzan, “All public relations objectives, policies, procedures, priorities, and responsibilities concerning the athletic program should be in writing and

¹¹ Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, 249.

¹² Ibid, 161.

¹³ J.E. Grunig & Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1984), 116.

distributed to each staff member."¹⁴ By keeping the entire staff involved and updated, the overall public relations program can become a priority.

Building Relationships with Key Publics

Building relationships is a key component to developing an effective athletic public relations program. "The term "community" is used in two major ways today in social science and communication literature: as a locality - people grouped by a geographic location and a nongeographic community of interest - people with a common interest."¹⁵ In the athletic community, subgroups exist including teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Athletic directors must establish and maintain relations with the community, coaches, parents and teachers to gain support for their athletic teams. Each group is a vital component to the continued success of any athletic department and school.

"Welcoming parents and young athletes to the athletic program is essential in the beginning of the school year. Explaining and discussing to parents and other members of the community is equally important throughout the year. That's why it's a good idea to find time to meet with service, fraternal, and other community organizations during the year to introduce new coaches, provide updates on the program, discuss the program in relation to current media emphases, or simply answer questions."¹⁶

¹⁴ Bronzan, Public Relations, Promotions and Fundraising for Athletic and Physical Education Programs, 76-77.

¹⁵ Grunig & Hunt, Managing Public Relations, 266.

¹⁶ Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Director's Survival Guide, 66.

Developing relationships with diverse leaders and key communicators in the community is a practice all athletic directors should establish. Bronzan believes that athletic directors need to seek out the most influential opinion leaders in the community and build lasting relationships with them. By doing so, the athletic director can get the pulse of the community and work to build a lasting link with the public.¹⁷

Andrew Grieve agrees, stating, “by informing community organizations of basic objectives and scope of the school’s athletic activities, the department may develop strong community support for the program.”¹⁸ Strong community support for the athletic department is crucial, especially during a bond referendum involving money for school athletics. An athletic director must always be aware of the powerful influence the community has on the athletic program and school.

In addition, the success of an athletic director will depend on his or her ability to recruit, guide and retain a qualified coaching staff. The coaching staff is the athletic director’s link to the student athletes and parents of the school. By building an open relationship with the coaching staff, the athletic director can gain support for the athletic public relations program.

Bronzan states, “Next to the athletic director, the coach is the individual

¹⁷ Ibid, 65.

¹⁸ Andrew Grieve, Directing High School Athletics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), 246.

who holds the major responsibility in public relations.”¹⁹ The coach and athletic director must be on the same page concerning all public relations activities.

Teamwork is a must.

The athletic director and coaches must work tirelessly to communicate and build relationships with parents. In addition, “...a good school-community relations program should encompass the concept of a partnership between the school and parents.”²⁰ However, this sometimes becomes a monumental task considering the turnover of athletes year in and year out. David Hoch states,

“Each sport is different, each season is different, and each coach is different. The fact that the athletes change from year to year presents a challenge to the coach, who must communicate with the parents. Interestingly enough, the most committed coaches understand this concept and work hardest at it – producing the highest parental turnout.”²¹

Some athletic directors may view building and maintaining relationships with parents as a burden, but “those who argue against the involvement of parents seem to forget that no other group of citizens in the community exerts a stronger influence on public opinion, and that only through a broad sense of favorable

¹⁹ Bronzan, Public Relations, Promotions and Fundraising for Athletic and Physical Education Programs, 190.

²⁰ Donald R. Gallagher, Don Bagin & Leslie Kindred, The School and Community Relations (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), 123.

²¹ David Hoch, “Educating the Parents: Additional Thoughts,” Coach and Athletic Director, v68, p.8-10.

opinion, can the school expect to make significant progress.”²² Koehler and Giebel agree, stating, "...it's always surprising to see how many schools develop adversarial or, at best, laissez-faire relationships with the parent community, failing to use them as moral and financial advocates of their sports program. Effective athletic directors acknowledge parents as allies in the continuing struggle to maintain successful athletic programs.”²³

Since parents in many communities exercise a great deal of power concerning athletics, it would be in their best interest to forge lasting relationships with all parents.

Athletic directors need to forge a special relationship with their athletes. These relationships are vitally important to the overall strength of the athletic program. According to Charlie Earling, there are two parts to the student-athlete's day. The first part is the academic curriculum and the second is the athletic or physical portion. Both are equally important to the overall development of the student athlete.²⁴ The athletic director's goal is to instill a sense of pride and commitment to both academics and athletics. Demonstrating to the public that the school stands for excellence in both areas is a great public relations technique.

²² Gallagher, Bagin & Kindred, The School and Community Relations, 124.

²³ Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Director's Survival Guide, 62.

²⁴ Charles Earling, Person Interview. November 5, 1999.

Athletic booster clubs also play a major role in the overall success of a program. Boosters are usually local people or parents with a vested interest in the athletic program. "Most boosters are genuinely concerned about the athletic program and are more than willing to raise money to improve it. They identify with the success of the athletic program by donating their time, money, and occasionally their experience and advice - hopefully, only when requested."²⁵ However, booster clubs often overstep their bounds creating problems for the athletic director and program.

"When boosters are self-serving and support athletics only to indulge a need to influence the program or the people within it, they interfere with its success. Such self-indulgent people often violate the spirit and the rules governing interscholastic athletics. Athletic directors and coaches must do all they can to control the involvement of boosters, especially those manipulative few who can do more harm than good."²⁶

Effective communication starts at the top with the athletic director and trickles down to the coaches and staff. Once open, two-way communication is established in the athletic program, the staff can concentrate on building relationships with parents, athletes and the community.

Crisis Management

One aspect of athletic public relations most athletic directors dread is a

²⁵ Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Director's Survival Guide, 155.

²⁶ Ibid, 80.

crisis situation. Since the local media cover a wide-array of high school athletics, a minor incident can turn into a major crisis. This could include anything from a star basketball player being caught cheating on a final exam to three soccer players being suspended for drinking at the junior prom. Often, crisis situations cannot be avoided. However, knowing what to say and do may save the athletic program and school from confusion and embarrassment.

During a crisis situation, does the athletic director have an obligation to tell the public everything? Many may argue differently, but Jaksa and Pritchard argue that "...school administrators have an ethical obligation when they communicate to a particular public to provide substantially complete and truthful information in a context that demonstrates respect for that public. They must view the public as made up of persons capable of making rational choices, rather than manipulable tools."²⁷ Jensen agrees, saying that public relations should begin with the premise that the public has the right to know everything about the school system, and not just what the school personnel want them to know.²⁸

However, Jaksa and Pritchard also argue that "It is accepted in traditional ethics that one is not obligated to tell everything one knows at all times. The

²⁷ J.A. Jaksa & M.S. Pritchard, Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis (Belmont, California: Wordsworth, 1994), 76.

²⁸ Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletics, 156.

ethics literature is filled with examples illustrating how divulging particular truthful information could, in itself, be an unethical act.”²⁹

These differing but equally valid assertions demonstrate that there is no clear-cut evidence suggesting how to disseminate information to the public in a crisis situation. However, David Martinson offers his assessment, stating, “I do not believe being truthful requires that one communicate “everything” to all parties under all circumstances; there are limits even in a democratic society to the public right to know. However, a desire to communicate truthful information must be at the core of every school public relations effort even when the information communicated might not place the school in the best possible light.”³⁰

Publicity

Publicizing high school athletics is often overlooked unless it is part of an overall public relations program for the school. However, the effective promotion and publicity of an athletic program can become an image booster for the entire school. Conversely, negative publicity can destroy a school’s image in the eyes of the community. Both aspects need to be studied by athletic directors to fully develop an effective public relations program for the school.

²⁹ Jaksa & Pritchard, Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis, 76.

³⁰ David L. Martinson, “School Communication to outside publics: truthfulness must be the bottom line.” NASSP Bulletin, v82, 81-88.

“Publicity means attracting public attention or public acclaim. It involves the attraction of public attention towards something such as a person, an event or a program. It is usually done for promotional reasons. Publicity is one important aspect of public relations, but it is not synonymous with public relations. Normally, competitive athletics receive more publicity than other school activities. Consequently, the publicity about athletic events is significant in the school’s public relations effort.”³¹

How many high school athletes do not receive the recognition they deserve because coaches and athletic directors are not well versed in media relations? Unfortunately, probably many. But, all athletic directors must realize that it's not too late to publicize their programs. Actually, it may be as simple as becoming more in tune with how the media works.

Media Relations

Developing sound media relations is an outstanding way for athletic directors to publicize their athletic teams. Media outlets have expanded in recent years to include: newspapers, newsletters, magazines, television, radio, the Internet, and others. The first question any athletic director needs to ask is – what makes a story newsworthy?

Many will argue differently on what is news, but often it’s a simple event

³¹ Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, 162.

that's different. For the pessimist at heart, it's whatever information the media gatekeeper allows to flow to the public. The media is a powerful force and obtaining positive coverage for athletic teams and the school is always a big deal because the organization is being recognized. The next step is learning how to get recognition from the media.

"A thoughtful mixture of athletic and academic piques the interest of newspaper editors - especially now, when so much attention is devoted to the negative aspects of athletic competition."³² The news media will jump at the opportunity to run a negative or controversial story about an athletic program, but may not show the same enthusiasm for a positive story. As a result, athletic directors face the daunting task of pitching positive and newsworthy stories to the media to obtain coverage.

According to Grunig and Hunt, "The media does not tell us what to think, but what to think about."³³ If this simple premise is true, it's easy to see why the media has such a powerful influence on the public. But, athletic directors can use the media to their advantage to obtain positive news coverage for the school.

Although technology has made it easier to reach large segments of the public through media outlets, the most prevalent is still the newspaper. Charles Bucher states, "The newspaper is one of the most common and useful media for

³² Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Directors Survival Guide, 202.

³³ Grunig & Hunt, Managing Public Relations, 7.

disseminating information. It reaches a large audience and can be helpful in interpreting physical education and athletics to the public at large."³⁴ As a result, athletic directors need to utilize newspapers to obtain positive coverage for their athletic teams and school.

However, athletic directors need to make sure that stories sent to reporters and editors are relevant and newsworthy. "Sending reams of news releases with little news value to an extensive mailing list of media that has no use for them abuses the media."³⁵ Moreover, all information released from the athletic director needs to be done professionally.

Robert Purdy argues that "Often times an athletic director is overwhelmed by requests from local and area newspaper reporters. They may take the form of schedules, team rosters, information on special nights, coaching assignments, etc. There is a tendency to minimize the importance of these requests by failing to return necessary information to the papers or by slipshod, inaccurate reporting."³⁶

Bucher sites the most common reasons for rejecting material include limited reader interest, poor writing, inaccuracies and insufficient information.³⁷

³⁴ Bucher, Administration of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, 577.

³⁵ Grunig & Hunt, Managing Public Relations, 7.

³⁶ Robert L. Purdy, The Successful High School Athletic Program, (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, 1973), 49.

³⁷ Bucher, Administration of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, 577.

Effectively using the media to obtain positive coverage for the athletic program can benefit the school and community. However, the media can also portray a school's athletics in a negative light with the stroke of a pen. Athletic directors need to be aware of both the positives and negatives associated with media coverage.

David Hoch, in the March 1999 issue of Coach and Athletic Director, cites several different tips to effectively deal with the press on a consistent basis.

Guidelines for dealing with the media:

- Be positive in your speech and actions.
- Do not blame officials, injuries, or the weather for losses.
- Think before speaking. Ask yourself: How will these comments be perceived?
- Be prepared. Have rosters and stats readily available. Anticipate probable questions.
- Don't say anything "off the record" unless you're prepared to read your words in the paper the next morning.
- It's better to say too little than too much.
- Avoid making predictions for the game or season. Too many variables can throw you off track and make you look foolish or frivolous.³⁸

Developing the skills needed to effectively deal with the media should be a main priority for all high school athletic directors. However, developing these skills takes practice and commitment to an overall public relations plan for the school.

³⁸

Hoch, Handling the "PR", Coach and Athletic Director, v68n8, 4-6.

Image

Building a positive, lasting image of the school through athletics has to be a major objective for all high school athletic directors since the athletic department often defines the character of the school. For example, if the public perceives a school's athletic department as poor, the possibility exists that the school's academics may be perceived as weak. The same holds true if the public perceives the school's athletics as strong.

According to Robert Purdy, "Many schools receive a good or bad reputation from the actions and reactions of their athletic teams' coaches. As representatives of schools and communities we must constantly be aware of our responsibilities and obligations. The behavior of spectators, cheerleaders, and adult followers is a definite reflection on the school and the athletic program being conducted."³⁹ These intangibles contribute to the overall image of the school.

Craig Cicardo, athletic director at Mater Dei (NJ) High School, believes that often the burden of image building for the school is delegated to the athletic department. "There is a lot of pressure from parents, the community and media to continually maintain a positive image for the school."⁴⁰ Once the public perceives an athletic department or school as inferior, the task of changing the attitude becomes increasingly more difficult.

³⁹ Purdy, The Successful High School Athletic Program, 58.

⁴⁰ Craig Cicardo. Personal interview. November 9, 1999.

Evaluation of the Program

Once an athletic public relations program is firmly established, an evaluation process should be installed to monitor the program's activities. Jensen believes a regular evaluation process will help define goals and objectives needed for the overall success of the athletic department. Jensen states, "Regular, critical evaluation of the overall public relations effort is a method by which success is determined and improvements are made. This should include an ongoing process of error detection and correction. It helps to ask yourself questions about your public relations approach and give yourself honest answers. Clearly defined public relations goals that are attainable can serve as a measure of success."⁴¹

Jensen continues by stating, "The school public relations program must be honest in terms of both intent and implementation. It must be continuous, positive, comprehensive, sensitive to the particular public, and communicate information that is useful and easily understood. The identification of weaknesses in any of these elements is good reason to adjust the public relations approach."⁴² The key for all high school athletic directors is to identify weaknesses in public relations activities and incorporate new techniques to make them positive.

⁴¹ Jensen, Administrative Management of Physical Education and Athletic Programs, 162.

⁴² Ibid, 163.

Grunig and Hunt emphasize the importance of the evaluation process by saying, “An evaluation is worthless unless the results are put to use. Evaluations should change programs. Don’t use them to support your program when the results show the program worked and ignore them when the results show the program did not work.”⁴³

Koehler and Giebel go a step further in discussing the evaluation process stating, “Athletic directors who pad annual reports with positive or inaccurate comments about athletics may keep the principal happy, but operating that way does little to provide for the continuing improvement of the program. The only way to assure improvement within the program is to conduct periodic needs assessments within the department, then make efforts, in conjunction with the coaches, to meet those needs.”⁴⁴

VanderZwaag provides an interesting overview of the evaluation process for high school athletic programs. “Evaluation is a complicated topic. It is an activity that can be approached from many different angles. There is no perfect system of evaluation. There is a never-ending search for a more effective means of evaluation. In spite of any pitfalls, three questions loom as critical when we consider the evaluation process: Why? Who? and How?”⁴⁵ Chapter Four will

⁴³ Grunig & Hunt, Managing Public Relations, 182.

⁴⁴ Koehler & Giebel, Athletic Director’s Survival Guide, 184.

⁴⁵ VanderZwaag, Sport Management in Schools and Colleges, 199.

discuss specific tips on how to administer an effective evaluation of a high school athletic public relations program.

Chapter Three

Design of the Study

Information for this study was gathered at Rowan University's Library using the electronic catalogs and related databases. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, Virtual Academic Library Environment of New Jersey (ABI INFORM – Business & Periodical Abstracts), Wilson Business Abstract (1995-99), and Rowan's electronic catalog system were used to obtain related research and literature.

The key words, "high school athletics," "physical education and school administration," "sports public relations," "athletic directors and public relations," "high school athletics and school administration," "high school athletics and community relations," and "school public relations" were used.

Most of the background and related literature was found in athletic/physical education books, journals and magazines. The author examined selected chapters of numerous athletic administration books pertaining to public relations, communication, community relations, publications, and media relations.

Selected athletic journals and magazines were used to obtain current information on public relations practices that are used by high school athletic

directors. These practices included crisis management, building and maintaining relationships with parents, and effective communication techniques.

The purpose of the literature search was to obtain documented public relations practices used by athletic directors and to compare them to current practices used by athletic directors in New Jersey. These practices were obtained through in-depth interviews by the author. The researcher analyzed the responses given by the athletic directors and cross-referenced them with practices reported in the related research to create a consensus of proven, effective athletic public relations practices.

As primary research, the author interviewed 15 high school athletic directors from public and private high schools in New Jersey only. The athletic directors used for the study represented 14 of New Jersey's 21 counties.

The questions asked of each athletic director during the interview followed a similar pattern and format; however, it should be noted that many of the interviews explored different areas of athletic public relations depending on the athletic directors expertise and willingness to expand the scope of the discussion.

A sample questionnaire is located in Appendix II. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the telephone. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to determine which public relations practices used by high school athletic directors are most effective.

Furthermore, input from athletic directors on the need and importance of the study was discussed during the interviews and used in Chapter One.

Chapter Four

A Guide to Effective Public Relations For the High School Athletic Director

Overview

An effective high school athletic public relations program incorporates a wide-array of disciplines, each requiring specific knowledge and action for the agenda to be successful. At the forefront is the athletic director who provides the leadership, guidance and stability needed to forge an effective public relations campaign. To think that public relations will occur naturally without effort is archaic; the key to maintaining good public relations revolves around the simple principle of building solid relationships with all community members involved with the athletic department and school.

With all of the demands placed on high school athletic directors, it is easy to see why public relations often takes a back seat to administrative or financial obligations. However, its importance should not be overlooked considering that high school athletic teams often define the image of the school. Many proven public relations techniques being used today can be implemented without spending a great deal of money or taking up a lot of time. Nonetheless, planning and organization are imperative for a public relations program to flourish.

This handbook was completed by cross-referencing first-hand experiences of public relations practices used by high school athletic directors in New Jersey with existing literature written about the subject. The result is a public relations guidebook of the most successful public relations practices used by high school athletic directors.

The handbook is broken down into public relations categories for easy reference and are listed below:

- *General Practices - Getting Stated*
 1. Define your message, audience and channel (MAC Triad)
 2. Define your purpose
 3. Define your plan
 4. Define staff responsibilities

- *Developing Relationships with Key Publics*
 1. Community
 2. Parents
 3. Coaches
 4. School Administration, Staff and Students

- *Media Relations*

- *News Releases*

- *Crisis Management*

- *Building a Positive Image*

- *Evaluation*

Since a high school athletic public relations program does not occur in a vacuum, you need to visualize the whole picture and determine how public relations can help the athletic program and school. Just implementing suggestions from this handbook will not guarantee a successful public relations program; rather, everyone in the school and the community must make an effort to enhance the athletic department through the use of public relations.

A note to all high school athletic directors: This is just a guidebook to the most effective public relations practices I have found in related literature and first-hand research. Feel free to implement your own strategies -- and most importantly -- learn from your mistakes. No one expects you to become the all-knowing oracle concerning athletic public relations. Have fun and be creative - experience the power public relations can have on your athletic program and school.

Getting Started

Getting started may be the most difficult part of the public relations process, but once you get rolling, everything seems to fall into place. The keys are defining the correct message, audience and channel for your needs, and developing a plan that everyone can easily follow. Implementing a few public relations activities will benefit your program, but the real benefits lie in the planning, implementation and evaluation stages.

□ **Define your message, audience, and channel (MAC Triad)**

All three of these elements are essential to communicate effectively with your desired publics. If one of these principles is missing, your receiver will not get the intended message. Take some time to research how your intended audience receives messages. For example, do not spend a lot of money on a fancy four-color newsletter if your intended audience would rather look at a simple flyer.

□ **Define your purpose**

Make sure you define a clear purpose for the athletic public relations program. However, make sure your plan coincides with the school's purpose. A public relations campaign without a clear purpose will lead you nowhere.

□ **Define your plan**

With all of the constraints placed on high school athletic directors, it is easy to see why many programs do not have a public relations plan. However, by developing a plan, you can create the framework that the whole staff can follow. Moreover, by having a written document, evaluation of the program is possible.

The plan does not need to be elaborate, but it should include goals, issues, objectives, strategies, and tactics. Moreover, the athletic director should assess the current state and ideal state for all public relations activities. In addition, research will help you define the correct messages, audiences and channels. A good public relations plan should include:

A Real and Ideal State

Determine what your athletic department is facing and where you want to be by implementing the plan.

Segmented Audiences

Determine and prioritize your target audience and the desired effects through a communication or public relations plan. Segmented audiences can be broken down into internal, external, intermediary and special.

Example: Parents, students, faculty and so forth.

Issues

Define the issues that are facing your athletic program and rank them in order of importance to the school.

Example: There has been a steady decrease in ticket sales to home basketball games for the past year.

Goals

Set a goal that is challenging, yet, obtainable. A goal is commonly described as the desired outcome of a plan or action.

Example: To increase parental attendance at all home basketball games.

Objectives

Objectives must: address the desired or communication or behavioral

outcome; designate the public or publics among whom the behavioral outcome is to be recognized; specify a particular level of attainment or accomplishment; and identify a period.

Example: Increase by 10% the number of basketball tickets purchased by parents by the start of the playoffs.

Strategies

The thoughtful, planned general approach to the tactics ultimately undertaken. Strategies do not indicate specific actions to be taken to achieve objectives.

Example: Demonstrate to parents that attending basketball games is an affordable family activity.

Tactics

The specific activities conducted to implement strategies of a public relations program.

Example: Design, produce and distribute a newsletter highlighting the hoop team and asking for support from parents. Also, offer discount coupons for admission.

Resources, Constraints and Benefits

List resources available to the organization such as people, time, money, connections and so forth. You should also be aware of constraints facing the organization such as budget or work force. In addition, list

specific benefits your audiences will enjoy from the public relations approaches you plan to implement.

Evaluation

Always evaluate your program once it is completed. Evaluation is essential to predict the success of your plan and determine the positives and negatives of the campaign.

□ Define responsibilities

Before you sit down to implement a public relations program, lay out precise responsibilities for yourself and staff. By defining specific roles in the public relations campaign, confusion and redundancy will be avoided. Also, make sure each staff member receives a written copy of all responsibilities and procedures.

Developing Relationships with Key Publics

The foundation of any high school athletic public relations program can be summed up in one word – relationships. It is the responsibility of the high school athletic director to develop and maintain relationships with essential publics – most notably community members, parents, coaches, athletes and the school administration. By developing positive, long-standing relations with important publics, you can seize the opportunity to implement a public relations program

that will benefit the entire school. On the other hand, neglecting essential publics can hurt the public relations program and ultimately reflect poorly on the school.

Building and maintaining positive relationships with all of your publics is crucial to the success of your public relations campaign. Having great media relations and an interactive web site means nothing if you do not have the backing of your key publics. Good communication with your audience leads to good public relations. Take the time to get to know your publics, and encourage feedback to make your athletic program stronger.

Below are some proven public relations techniques used to help improve relationships with essential publics.

Developing Effective Community Relations

- **Seek out opinion leaders and key communicators in the community**

By building relationships with key members of the community, you can sense the pulse of the community – their likes, dislikes, concerns, and so forth. Develop a key communicator program with the influential leaders in the town so two-way communication can flow between the school and community.

- **Get the community involved with the athletic program**

Invite members of the community to help support the athletic department. Establish a community newsletter, mail community members schedules or hold special events involving the community. Many communities will gladly support

high school athletics; it is your job to welcome them in, and continually nurture the positive relationship.

□ **Open the school's athletic facilities to the community**

Allowing the community to use athletic facilities is a great way to develop lasting relationships. Many schools have community recreation programs already established under the direction of the athletic director and can be run at minimal cost. Athletes in the athletic program can be used to coach, referee, and monitor events. Moreover, the ties that are built through school-sponsored recreation can be invaluable in finding community support for athletic facility bond referendums.

□ **Look for businesses to sponsor athletic teams in the program**

Recruiting local businesses to help sponsor teams or events will help cut costs and build relationships. However, keep in mind that the sponsorship must be limited and you must be the final authority on contributions. In addition, check with your state's athletic governing body concerning rules involving sponsorship.

Developing Relationships with Parents

□ **Establish and maintain an open door policy with all parents**

No matter how small the issue, establish and maintain open, two-way

communication with parents. Clearly establish dates and times you can meet with parents.

- **Host a meeting for parents outlining the goals and objectives of the athletic program for the upcoming season**

Many of the athletic directors I interviewed for this project believe this tactic is the most important. Parental involvement is imperative to a strong athletic program; therefore, inviting the parents on campus creates a sense of belonging and active participation. Keep the meetings short, but outline the major points you want to address and always have a Q & A session.

- **Develop a booklet listing all athletic competitors and directions to all away competitions for the season**

With this booklet, parents will have a hands-on resource to consult to determine the location of away competitions. In addition, this will reduce the number of calls to the school from people wanting directions. Ed Hill, athletic director at Collingswood (NJ) High School, said he receives more positive feedback on this public relations technique than any other tactic he has instituted.

- **Encourage and maintain parent booster clubs**

Encouraging booster clubs is a great way to get parents involved with athletics and also raise money for events, trips, new uniforms, and so forth. Booster clubs often sponsor bake sales, car washes, bazaars, and other special

events to help support the athletic program. Meet regularly with the booster clubs and work to build and maintain positive relationships.

Developing Relationships with Coaches

□ Consistently communicate with all coaches

Coaches are your public relations warriors. You must be the leader, mentor and counselor concerning all public relations activities, but the coaches are the ones who implement and maintain the public relations campaign. This includes building relationships with parents, maintaining media relations, updating schedules and so forth.

Keep the channels of communication open and always encourage two-way feedback. Remember: your public relations plan is dependent on having the full support of the coaching staff. Use their talents to your advantage.

□ Establish PR guidelines for each coach

Develop a set of written guidelines outlining the public relations expectations for each coach. This may be as simple as calling in the scores for each game to detailed procedures for handling media inquiries. Document everything. It will save you a lot of confusion and headaches.

Develop Relationships with Administrators, Staff and Students

□ Athletics and money

Athletics cost money. Since you do not control the power of the purse – except for your budget - make sure the school's administration and board clears everything you do. Keep them up-to-date on the public relations activities you have implemented and personally invite them to athletic contests. Remember: many administrators and school board members are huge fans of high school athletics – get them involved!

□ Recruit teachers and students

Use the school's people resources to your advantage. Recruit teachers and students to work on the newsletter, sell tickets at the hoop game or volunteer to help with the annual car wash. For your public relations program to be successful, teamwork is essential.

□ Use your maintenance team to your advantage

Your maintenance crew may be your most valuable resource. Set expectations and invite feedback. Your athletic fields say a lot about the school's image, and your maintenance crew has a lot to do with its success.

Media Relations

To maintain an effective public relations program for the athletic department, the athletic director, staff and coaches must maintain a solid working relationship with all media personnel. It is not a coincidence that certain high school athletic teams are always plastered in the regional newspaper or local sports show. Most athletic directors agree that helps to have good athletic teams who consistently win, but if you look more closely at the situation, you will probably find an athletic director who has an established and credible public relations program.

In addition, media coverage should not be limited specifically to sporting events. Media outlets often cover stories on new athletic facilities, scholar-athletes, and community events involving athletic teams, fundraising and so forth. Athletic directors need to be aware of what is newsworthy. Developing relationships with the local sports writers and editors can help determine which types of stories are relevant, and these people – the media gatekeepers – are the ones who control the information that flows to the public.

For example, pitching a story about a five-point win in a basketball game may not stop the presses at the local newspaper. But, a story about the starting center who has just been accepted to an Ivy League school and volunteers at the

local nursing home on the weekends, is a great human-interest story and might get some ink.

Dealing with the media can often be an intimidating and trying experience. Take media relations seriously when developing your public relations program. The media would rather cover a winning team or a crisis, but this does not mean you cannot obtain coverage. Get to know the media people in your area and send them newsworthy material. If you are not sure what is newsworthy, give a reporter and editor a call and run it by them.

Below are some suggestions to help build and establish a good relationship with the media.

- **Be open and honest with all media inquiries whether negative or positive**

As a rule of thumb – always tell the truth regardless of the situation. This rule will save many headaches in the future. It takes years to establish a credible image and moments to destroy it.

- **Maintain and update a list of media contacts in your area**

You never know when you'll have to get in contact with the media on short notice. Be proactive and create a list of contacts that is easily accessible and updated. Make sure your coaches and staff members have a copy.

- **Prepare a briefing book**

A briefing book highlights the school's athletic teams, coaches,

administration, primary contacts and schools demographics. A briefing book is a valuable resource for local media people who need facts concerning the school and the athletic program. Make sure your facts are current and correct. A sloppy or unprofessional briefing book may create the perception of a lackluster school and athletic program.

- **Do not be afraid to tell the media, "I don't know, I'll get back to you"**

Research the question and get back to the reporter at a specified time.

Making up an answer or lying will only ruin your credibility with the media and hurt the school's image.

- **Know what "off the record" means**

Unless you absolutely trust the reporter or the circumstances are unique, be wary of using this technique because it could come back and haunt you. Give the reporter information you are willing to stand behind. The safest policy is to never tell a reporter anything you would not want to appear on the sports page.

- **Do not answer hypothetical questions**

These questions are often traps. When a reporter begins a question with "What if ..." simply say that you cannot speculate.

- **Never say "no comment"**

This is a sure-fire way to be perceived as hiding something. If you do not

know the answer, say so and offer to find out the answer as quickly as possible.

When you cannot disclose certain information, state the reason in a matter-of-fact way. This is especially important if you are dealing with a touchy subject like a student's grade or test score.

□ **Use plain English**

Do not use educational or sports jargon. Try to keep things simple, factual and concise. If you do need to use specific terminology in the sports field, make sure you explain it as simply as possible.

□ **Keep answers short**

When dealing with television and radio interviews, try to speak in 30-second sound bites. If you are stressing a specific point, do not hesitate to restate it several times during the interview.

News Releases

As you have probably guessed, media relations involves a lot of do's and don'ts. However, the benefits to your athletic program will outweigh the hassle. One of the most common ways to communicate with the news media is through news releases. Athletic news releases inform the media of newsworthy sports people, events, dates and so forth.

Overall, make sure your news releases answer the six magic questions: who, what, where, when, why and how. By doing so, you can increase the

chances of having your release used for a story; obtaining positive coverage is the name of the game.

Below are some tips to develop an effective news release.

□ **News release format**

Choose a format that you are comfortable with and that is accepted by the local media outlets. Below are some tips:

1. Double spaced
2. White, 8 ½ by 11 inch paper
3. Black-ink only
4. Use only one side of the paper
5. Upper left hand corner: sender's name, address, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address.
6. Upper right hand corner: the release date or "For Immediate Release"
7. Use "more" at the bottom of each page
8. Mark the end of the release by the word "End," ###, or "30."

(A sample news release can be found in Appendix I)

□ **News releases need to be factual, relevant, free from bias, timely, and most important - appealing**

If you are not sure your press release is newsworthy - it probably is not.

Find an angle that has not been used before. Call a reporter and ask for feedback and suggestions on how you can improve your writing and the overall presentation of your release.

□ **Learn and respect all media deadlines**

Most media outlets are fanatical about deadlines because it is a time-driven

industry. Therefore, make sure you submit all releases on time, and include all pertinent contact information.

□ **Know how each media outlet likes to receive news releases**

Do they want them mailed, faxed or e-mailed? Should the releases be stapled or paper clipped? Following specific guidelines will increase the chances of your news release being used.

□ **Proofread all news releases**

Make sure all news releases are grammatically correct and error-free. The chances of a poorly written news release being used are slim and may negatively affect your relationship with the reporter or editor. If proofreading is not your specialty, have someone from the English department lend expertise.

□ **Establish a mechanism for evaluating media coverage**

Clip all news stories from the paper and tape radio and television broadcasts involving the athletic department. Without an evaluation process, you will have no idea if your media relations program is making a difference or not.

Crisis Management

The true test of an effective public relations program can be demonstrated by how the organization reacts to a crisis. Recently, the University of Minnesota basketball program came under fire for a massive academic scandal and cover-up.

The school's public relations effort was a complete debacle and now the school's reputation and image have been severely damaged.

You need to be prepared to handle situations that are out of the norm. True - you may not receive the scrutiny and media coverage a large university might, but handling inquiries from uninformed parents, teachers, students and community members takes special skills and can make or break the relationships you have worked so hard to maintain.

Below are some suggestions to consult during a crisis.

- **Never, under any circumstances, cover-up or lie concerning a crisis involving your athletic department**

The results could be devastating to the school and athletic department. Repairing relationships with parents, the media, school board and community will be an uphill battle. Follow this simple premise: Always tell the truth regardless of the situation.

- **Do not wait for a crisis to happen - prepare!**

Get prepared by establishing a crisis communication plan with primary contacts, telephone lists and so forth. Waiting for a crisis to occur without preparation will only lead to confusion between staff members. Often, it is difficult to foresee the timing or severity of a crisis, but providing a basic framework of how things will operate may prove to be invaluable.

□ **Designate one spokesperson for all inquiries**

Preferably, you should be the spokesperson. However, depending on the severity of the situation, the principal or school administrator may step in.

Regardless, only one person should speak on behalf of the school. In addition, make sure the spokesperson is informed of every detail involving the crisis.

□ **Establish open, two-way communication with all publics**

To demonstrate how important open, two-way communication is during a crisis, read the Tylenol case study. Johnson & Johnson's public relations effort during the crisis is considered the benchmark. Review the Exxon Valdez case study to know what not to do.

□ **Keep all students and school employees well informed**

This does not mean that students and school employees need to be informed about every aspect of a crisis. Rather, information should be released through letters or memos explaining the situation and how the school will respond to the crisis. Rumors should be dispelled or confirmed immediately. The last thing you need to deal with during a crisis is an out-of-control rumor.

Promotion and Publicity

Promoting the school's athletic teams is a vital aspect of an overall public relations program for high school athletics. Since advertising is very expensive,

you must find creative ways to publicize your athletic program without breaking the budget.

Promoting your program may seem like a lot of work, but the benefits justify the effort. It is a wonderful feeling to have a successful athletic program that is supported by the students, faculty and community. Promotion and publicity are two of the tools used to bring everything together. Use both elements to your advantage.

Below are suggestions to help promote your athletic teams on a consistent basis.

❑ **Report all scores to local media outlets**

In most schools, the coaches are responsible for reporting the scores of just-completed contests to ensure ample coverage. However, you must monitor this practice amongst coaches to make sure the scores are valid. In 1997, a scandal erupted in Massachusetts when a group of high school ice hockey coaches were charged with reporting false scores to area newspapers. Supposedly, it was an accepted practice in Massachusetts to change the score if the game was lopsided so the losing team would not be embarrassed.

To shorten a long story, a Boston Globe photographer broke the story that eventually received national coverage and portrayed Massachusetts' high school hockey in a negative light. To avoid this problem – always report accurate scores.

□ **Use media advisories to invite reporters to athletic contests or events**

In a media advisory, you want to give a reporter a taste of what is going to happen, but not the whole deal. Make sure you answer the four magic questions: who, what, where and why. In addition, follow up with your contacts to see if they will be coming to an event, and what you can do to prepare for their arrival.

□ **Announce team and individual awards**

Using the school's public address system is a great way to announce individual and team accomplishments to students and faculty. Moreover, people tend to follow winners. Be proud of your athletes' accomplishments and get the students and staff excited about athletics. Remember: most of the general student body and staff will have no idea your athletic teams are doing well unless you promote them.

□ **Oversee the upkeep of school bulletin boards**

Using school bulletin board space can be vital to publicizing recent athletic accomplishments and upcoming sporting events. Bulletin boards should be appealing and informative. Recruit students to keep bulletin boards current.

□ **Develop and maintain a "Wall of Fame"**

Developing and maintaining a "Wall of Fame" or "Hall of Athletes" can

be valuable tool to help attract alumni back to the school. A committee should be elected to oversee the "Wall of Fame," and elections should occur once a year.

New elections can receive positive press coverage for both the individuals being honored and the school. Make the effort to call the local sports editor or write a timely press release.

□ **Distribute an athletic department newsletter**

The athletic department can create its own publicity by distributing an athletic newsletter featuring scores, highlights and athlete profiles. The newsletter can be distributed to students, faculty and community members.

Many athletic departments do not have the resources or money to produce high-quality, four-color publications; however, many of the desktop publishing tools currently available produce quality newsletters. Use the students and faculty to write stories and help with the layout and design. Be creative!

□ **Distribute athletic schedules for all contests**

Athletic schedules for every season should be distributed to all students, parents, faculty members and the community. Informing the public of when your sports teams are playing can help build support and excitement for the teams. In addition, send out schedules to the local media outlets and businesses.

□ **Create and maintain an athletic web site**

With recent advances in computer technology, schools can now create web

pages for the school with a link to athletics. Web pages are a great resource to obtain information on coaches, schedules, recent scores and so forth. In addition, make sure the school's web site address is properly disseminated to the public.

However, for an athletic web page to be effective, all information must be consistently updated. Do not make the mistake of underestimating how much time and work goes into a project of this nature. Look to the school computer department to get ideas, and recruit students to work on the project. Remember: you are the final authority on what goes on the page.

□ **Use local cable sports shows to your advantage**

Today, many cable stations carry local high school sports. Contact these outlets to visit your school and cover an outstanding athlete or team. Not only will you publicize a student athlete's accomplishments, but you will also boost the image of the school.

Enhancing the Athletic Department's Image

As stated before, a school's athletic program often defines a school's image. With this in mind, you must evaluate how the public views your school and program. It may take years to build a positive image in the public's mind, but it only takes a moment to destroy it.

Do not confuse your athletic program's identity with its image. Image deals with people's perception and attitudes towards your program, and identity deals

with how your organization views itself. Knowing the difference is essential to an ongoing public relations campaign.

Below are some tips to help enhance a positive image for your athletic program.

□ **Athletic facilities**

Take the time to make sure all athletic facilities are in good shape – especially if the contest will be televised. Work closely with your maintenance people to ensure the facilities are safe and well maintained.

□ **Uniforms**

Make sure your teams' uniforms are neat and clean. A ragged looking team will reflect poorly on the school.

□ **Sportsmanship**

As the leader of your school's athletic public relations effort, you must instill a sense of sportsmanship in each athlete. Host a meeting at the beginning of the school year for all athletes and parents to discuss expectations.

Evaluation of the Program

Once your public relations program is planned and established, an evaluation process should be developed to measure its effectiveness. The evaluation process is often overlooked, yet it is one of the most important elements of a public relations campaign.

Evaluating your public relations activities is imperative to determine its strengths and weaknesses. One of the mistakes athletic directors make is not taking the time to judge the worth of the public relations program. In addition, effective public relations practices can always be improved. Do not become complacent with your current public relations program; try to improve it and implement new ideas.

Below are some ideas to help you evaluate your public relations program.

□ **Survey your publics**

Survey your audiences to gauge their perception of your yearly public relations campaign. You can use focus groups, mail surveys, in-depth interviews and other research techniques to obtain qualitative and quantitative data. Once you review the data, use the results to see where you can make changes to strengthen the public relations program.

□ **Evaluate your written communications**

At the end of each school year, review all written communications. This includes memos, news releases, newsletters and letters to the public. Determine which pieces were successful and which ones need improvement. By doing so, you can improve your overall communication with the public.

□ **Evaluate procedures and roles**

Establishing your public relations program will be a series of trials and errors. Procedures and roles will constantly be evaluated and re-evaluated. Take the time to judge the worth of your contributions to the program. You may find that a coach or administrator is better equipped to handle the job. Do not be afraid to implement new ideas and use the strengths of your staff.

Evaluation

In evaluation of the high school athletic public relations programs in New Jersey, many effective public relations practices are being used today. Since most of the athletic directors interviewed are in tune with the attitudes and opinions of the community, many public relations practices flourish.

Some of the activities that are particularly successful are holding meetings with parents at the beginning of each season to keep everyone up-to-date on activities involving the athletic program. Inviting volunteers to get involved with high school athletics is another activity that will help a program prosper. Moreover, every athletic director interviewed stressed the importance of building and maintaining solid relationships with all publics.

In addition, two of the most creative public relations activities were printing directions to all away sports competitions, and having the high school athletes get involved with the town recreation program to help maintain positive relationships with the community.

Incorporating any of these activities into an overall school public relations program may help bring some attention to athletics or increase its visibility, but it should be noted that athletic directors often overlook some of the integral pieces of a successful, ongoing public relations program.

Two areas often omitted by high school athletic directors are the planning and evaluation processes. Among the athletic directors interviewed, few, if any,

have a formal public relations plan established for the athletic department.

Moreover, most do not rely on any form of evaluation to see if the activities used are effective. This brings up an interesting point because most related literature and research stress the planning and evaluation processes as intrinsic to any public relations program and critical to its success.

In analyzing this trend, the author believes that the disparity exists because of limited time, resources and budget constraints. In much of the related literature and research, authors outline complete public relations planning and evaluation designs for athletic directors to incorporate into an overall public relations program for the school. However, limited information is provided on how to accomplish these goals with limited means. Furthermore, private school athletic directors often have fewer resources than their public school counterparts.

As a result, it is beneficial to theorize and lay out the processes, but also provide alternative solutions to everyday constraints, such as time or people. This is not to say that athletic directors should disregard the planning and evaluation processes altogether. Rather, athletic directors should evaluate which practices can best enhance the program depending on the resources available.

In addition, much of the literature and research pertaining to high school athletic public relations is outdated and scattered throughout many sources. Recently, a push has been made to publish more books and journals relating to high school athletics with an emphasis on public relations. Consequently, athletic directors now have updated resources to consult when they need new ideas.

Recommendations for Further Study

To obtain a better understanding of the practices used by high school athletic directors, a comparative case study of two high school athletic public relations programs – one with an established public relations plan and one without – needs to be conducted. By analyzing both programs, athletic directors would be able to clearly evaluate the positives and negatives of each approach. Moreover, with very little research done on the area of high school athletic public relations, a study of this nature could yield groundbreaking results.

In addition, a study on the most effective communication channels used by high school athletic directors could be explored. A survey representing a random sample of high school athletic directors could yield qualitative and quantitative data about how they communicate with their staff, athletes, co-workers and diverse publics.

Appendix I

Sample News Release

Southern High School
110 North Shore Ave.
Westmont, New Jersey
856/345-1000

Contact: Joe Cranston
Public Information Officer
856-345-1000 ext. 1243

For Immediate Release

Smith Earns All-American Honors

Gary Smith, a two-time cross-country state champion and senior at Southern High School, has been named one of 15 All-American runners by USA Today.

Smith capped off his outstanding high school career with a first place finish at the New Jersey State Championships and a third place finish in the Footlocker National Championships in Orlando, Florida. His 15:38 in Orlando was the fastest time by a New Jersey runner since Jason DiJoseph ran 15:42 in 1988.

"This is a great honor, and I owe everything to the support of my family, teammates and coaches," said Smith.

The Georgetown-bound Smith carries a 4.0 G.P.A. and is a member of the National Honor Society.

Appendix II

Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you been an AD?
- 2) Did you have any PR training when you became an AD?
- 3) Do you consult any PR resources such as books, guides, or handbooks?
- 4) Do you think most athletic directors are adequately trained to handle public relations activities for the school or do they learn as they go?
- 5) For new athletic directors, do you think a PR handbook would be useful resource?
- 6) Do you have a working public relations plan?
- 7) What practices have you found most effective in building community relations?
- 8) What practices have you found most effective in building relationships with parents?
- 9) What practices have you found most effective to building relationships with your athletes?
- 10) What is your opinion on the local sports media and does your athletic program receive adequate coverage? What successful practices have you used in dealing with the media?
- 11) Do you produce your own publications (i.e. brochures, schedules, and newsletters)?
- 12) Does your school have an athletic web site or link? Who is responsible for the information?
- 13) Have you ever had to deal with a crisis concerning your athletic program? What did you do to deal with the situation?
- 14) At your school, do you hold the major responsibility concerning public relations activities for the athletic teams?
- 15) What type of evaluation process do you have in place to measure your public relations activities?

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