

Public Relations Practice in English County Cricket: A Case Study of Durham County Cricket Club and Yorkshire County Cricket Club

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Introduction

This paper is a qualitative critical evaluation and analysis of the current level of public relations activity in English domestic First Class County cricket. The paper is the outcome of research which began in September 2002 and which was concluded in April 2003. The basis for this paper is a completed case study of Durham and Yorkshire County Cricket Clubs. These two clubs were chosen as the focus of the research because Durham CCC is the youngest First Class County Club and Yorkshire is one of the oldest, two very different organisations, then, operating in the same industry sector and market place. Both clubs currently reside in the second division of the English County Championship, are culturally and ideologically very different and, because they are both located in the North of England, are great rivals.

Most modern spectator sports operate as businesses and are having to adopt and adapt to the core business functions of marketing, finance and human resource management. A key objective of this strategy is building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with a range of publics, an objective that can only be achieved through the systematic and structured implementation of excellent public relations. Public relations is still considered to be a young profession and by some as a disreputable activity. However, it is proving to be a most valuable tool in sports management and promotion. Sports public relations is a particular and peculiar discipline which is identified in the literature as marketing public relations (MPR). Primary research conducted with marketing and public relations professionals, playing and coaching staff and sponsorship and media managers revealed the consensus that public relations is essential to the future commercial success of sport but the reality is that it is not formally implemented to the extent that it should be or, in the opinion of many within cricket, needs to be.

Methods

The research interest was to analyse public relations practice in English County Cricket and to offer a strategy for effective, proactive public relations. By using a case study approach, the primary research conducted for this study revealed the extent to which key stakeholder publics in contemporary First Class County cricket understand and utilise public relations. A key finding from the research is that the communications strategies recommended for use in cricket, are equally applicable and can offer the same potential benefits to all sports.

According to Cashmore, the contemporary fascination with sport has much to do with the fact that by consuming sport in various ways, we view and do for nothing more functional than avoiding what we do during the rest of our working week. The chosen methodology for the research project followed the qualitative paradigm and the exploratory case study approach was considered the most appropriate research strategy. The main reason for selecting the qualitative paradigm was that there is relatively little existing information and literature available about public relations in cricket. There is an extensive body of knowledge and literature in the fields of sport science and sport studies, but this tends to focus on general sports theories, which were beyond the scope of the study. In the area of sports marketing and sponsorship, a significant amount of material exists on the marketing and sponsorship of football, but again, information specifically related to cricket is scant.

Results

A key factor to emerge from the research is that public relations is extremely important at Durham County Cricket Club. Vicky Laverick, the club's Public Relations and Marketing Executive, is the personification of the club's commitment to this element of their marketing and promotion strategy as prior to Vicky's engagement the post did not exist. Durham CCC's approach to public relations is the exception rather than the rule amongst the eighteen First Class Counties. Yorkshire CCC, unlike Durham CCC, does not

have a dedicated public relations professional on the marketing team. In her role as Marketing and Sponsorship Manager, Liz Sutcliffe describes public relations activity as being important but it is not given specific financial resources. Though there is clearly a place for public relations, other techniques, which are clearly not aimed at the grass roots supporter, seem to be more important at Yorkshire. This is a clear example, which seems to be very common in domestic cricket, of public relations being subsumed or even overlooked in favour of other organisational functions and activities which are perceived as being more lucrative and cost effective. The overwhelming justification for developing a proactive approach to public relations and reputation management is found in Hutton et al's findings that a good reputation is fundamental to any organisation's success. It is evident from the research at both Durham and Yorkshire that cricket clubs, which depend upon continual replenishment of supporters for their long-term viability, need to be especially mindful of the implications of ignoring the basic principles of public relations.

Discussion/Conclusion

A dominant phrase in the lexicon of contemporary public relations and marketing communications is "relationship building". Public relations practice, historically has been directed towards managing communications. However, within the last five years, academics have begun to conceptualise the practice of public relations as relationship management, and research has become centred on critically examining the range of variables that impinge upon organisation-public relationships. The findings of such research continually show that effectively managed organisation-public relationships affect key public member attitudes, evaluations and behaviours. Actual recent research conducted by Bruning and also Hutton et al though not applied to cricket club publics, is nonetheless relevant. The fundamental tenet of such research is that publics will display long-term loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour to a company, brand or service if a relationally-based grounding is applied to organisational public relations practice. This theory of relationship building is completely consistent with Grunig's Two-way Symmetric Model of Public Relations which is characterised as follows:

Characteristics of the Two -Way Symmetric Public Relations Model

Purpose	Mutual understanding
Nature of Communication	Two-way; balanced effects
Communication Model	Group → Group Group ← Group
Nature of Research	Formative; evaluative of understanding
Leading Historical Figures	Bernays, educators, professional leaders
Where Practiced Today	Regulated business, agencies
Estimated Percentage of Organisations Practicing Today	15% (including Durham County Cricket Club)

The research findings for this dissertation indicate that this model is evident in the communication strategies of both Durham and Yorkshire CCCs but that Durham is more proactive in creating two-way symmetric communication strategies than Yorkshire. The obvious implication of such findings is that there is need for trained public relations practitioners at all First Class County Clubs.

In order for cricket clubs to further nurture lucrative relationships of the kind that have the potential to "draw in" future generations of supporters, an understanding of social exchange theory is also necessary: According to social exchange theory, individuals (publics), who are involved in interactions that they want to be positive, define and negotiate what *they* consider to be required for positive and negative communication, and "agree" on the rules and behaviours required to foster the relationship. By applying Grunig's situational theory of publics to the concept of relationship management it is evident that sports clubs, through a better understanding of how their publics operate, will be able to devise much more effective communications strategies.

It is evident from the research that those involved in the game recognise the need for and actively encourage what Peters and Waterman refer to as “Staying close to the customer.” This is an example of the active symmetrical communication which is practised extensively in what Peters and Waterman termed “Excellent Organisations”. Grunig says that it is only a small leap in logic to conclude that excellent organisations should have an excellent public relations function to manage this symmetrical communication. Both the cricket clubs and cricket in general must be thoroughly aware of who their publics are and be able to categorise them in accordance with Grunig’s typology of publics. Reference has been made to the fact that, perhaps as a result of lack of awareness or understanding of publics’ behaviour, key stakeholder publics in cricket have changed from being passive to active, a situation which needs to be addressed and reversed.

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