

REGAINING FAN TRUST AFTER NEGATIVE INCIDENTS: IS THERE A FIT BETWEEN RESPONSE AND THE NATURE OF INCIDENTS

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Literature Review

Sports are in the center of public interest, thus, media are always eager to find any sport-related stories. As a result, the incidents where athletes or coaches are involved are readily reported, and often times negative news is more easily found (Wilson, Stavros, & Westberg, 2008). When these negative incidents happen, people tend to lose their trust with the involved individuals or organizations. Although preventing any negative incidents altogether would be ideal, since it is impossible, exploring effective response strategies for negative incidents becomes an important issue in order to recover fans' trust and minimizing further damage.

Although some principles of crisis management have been known (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2006), strategies to effectively respond to different violations have not been researched much. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper and Dirks (2004) note that there is no universally effective strategy, but it rather depends on the nature of negative incidents. They found that apology was more effective for competence-related violations while denial was more effective for integrity-related violations. This is because individuals tend to think that even a high-competent person can perform poorly sometimes, thus admitting low performance and apologize for it would not be so detrimental. However, individuals intuitively believe that someone with high moral standard would refrain from dishonest behaviors in any situation making a single low-integrity behavior as a sufficient indicator for low integrity (Kim et al., 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the fit between different nature of negative incidents (competency-related vs integrity-related) and response types (apology vs denial) in recovering trust in the sport context where the importance of trust as a building block of relationship is even greater as the supports from fans for players, coaches, and teams are basically based on the created relationships. Literature has shown that fan identification plays an important role in explaining sport fan behaviors (Capella, 2002).

Methodology, Results, and Discussion

Two (competency-related vs integrity-related) by two (apology vs denial) between subjects design was used to examine whether there are better responses to certain violations to restore trust. Two studies were developed: one with fictional character and the other with actual character.

A real-life like local newspaper articles were developed with two different allegations about a hypothetical coach: one is integrity-related and the other is competence-related. The scenario describes many recent violations of players in his team: One version alleges that these violations are due to neglected background checks on

players and the coach's inferior recruiting ability to recruit players with clean background (competency-related scenario). The other version alleges lack of moral standard in recruiting procedure, which contributes to the recent violations (integrity-related scenario). Each version was paired with two different response types (i.e., denial and apology) resulting in four versions of questionnaire: Competency-apology, competency-denial, integrity-apology and integrity-denial.

For the first study, a total of 102 surveys were collected from undergraduate and graduate students in sport management major at two universities: competency-apology (n=26), competency-denial (n=26), integrity-apology (n=25), and integrity-denial (n=25). The results of the MANOVA showed that there was a main effect for response type (Wilk's $\lambda = .63$, $F(3, 92) = 18.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$): Apology was a better strategy after negative incidents regardless of the nature of the violation. The authors construed that the results might be due to two reasons. First is the participants' "no smoke without fire" mentality because these types of violations and allegations are not rare kind in collegiate athletics. Secondly, the results might be due to the lack of relationship between the hypothetical persona (i.e., Coach Smith) and the respondents. Since there was no established relationship, the respondents were unlikely to give any benefit of doubt.

Based on the second possibility, the second study was developed with an actual coach at Division I Football Bowl Subdivision, and 150 surveys were collected from the respective university. Identification level with the coach, and the respondents' perceived competency and integrity about the coach were examined prior to the main study. The result of MANCOVA with the identification as a covariate showed that there was a main effect for the nature of event [$F(3, 143) = 4.39$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$]: Integrity-violated incidents damaged trust more than competency-violated incidents. The results were interpreted considering the coach's winning record and short tenure at the institution. The importance of building and maintaining relationship as a buffer as well as effective communication strategies in case of negative incidents will be discussed.

Selected References

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