

Athlete Crises and Brand Image Recovery: Effective Crisis Management in Sport Organizations

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of athlete crises on brand image within the sport industry, emphasizing the interrelationship between brand attributes, benefits, and attitudes. A sport brand's image—comprising both product-related and symbolic dimensions—plays a crucial role in shaping fan loyalty and organizational credibility. However, athlete scandals, including unethical or corrupt behavior, can significantly erode trust, reduce perceived brand benefits, and damage consumer attitudes toward both the individual and affiliated organizations. Drawing from crisis management and communication theories—including stakeholder theory, structural-functional systems theory, diffusion of innovation theory, and unequal human capital theory—this study outlines how effective communication, stakeholder engagement, and organizational transparency are central to mitigating reputational harm. Established models of crisis management are applied to sport-specific contexts, highlighting cyclical processes of pre-crisis prevention, crisis response, and post-crisis recovery. The analysis underscores the necessity of proactive planning, rapid transparent communication, and sustained reputation monitoring. Ultimately, successful brand rehabilitation depends on rebuilding trust and authenticity through credible actions and consistent stakeholder dialogue. This integrative framework contributes to a deeper understanding of brand image management and recovery strategies in the aftermath of athlete-related crises.

Keywords: Athlete crises, Brand image, Crisis management, Sport organizations

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1. Brand Image and Athlete Crises

A brand in sport is defined as “a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its product from the competition” (Shank, 1999, p. 239). In today’s business environment, professional sports properties are increasingly managed as brands (Ross, 2006). Brand image, “the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brands” (Low & Lamb, 2000, p. 352), is central to this process. Effective brand rehabilitation requires understanding how scandals damage the brand images of sport celebrities and organizations. Brand image comprises three components: brand attributes, brand benefits, and brand attitudes.

Brand attributes include product-related characteristics, such as athletic performance, and non-product-related characteristics, including external factors influencing consumption (Sassenberg & Johnson-Morgan, 2010; Keller, 1998). Among these, trust is critical for celebrity endorsers (Sassenberg & Johnson-Morgan, 2010). Brand benefits reflect the personal value consumers attach to these attributes, encompassing functional, symbolic, and experiential benefits (Keller, 1993). Symbolic benefits—identification and internalization—directly influence sport fans’ attitudes, suggesting that celebrity crises may reduce perceived brand benefits (Kamins, Brand, Hoeke, & Moe, 1989; Sassenberg & Johnson-Morgan, 2010). Brand attitudes, shaped by attributes and benefits, impact consumer behavior and are crucial for post-crisis recovery (Johnson-Morgan, 2010; Keller, 1993). Closely related, brand credibility—consumers’ perception of a brand’s expertise and trustworthiness—is essential for sustaining loyalty (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

While positive brand image enhances brand loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005; Arai, Ko, & Kang, 2009), limited research examines the effects of negative brand image or crises on loyalty and fan perceptions. A crisis is “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten, or are perceived to threaten, an organization’s high-priority goals” (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998, p. 233). In sports, an athlete crisis arises from unethical or corrupt behavior that negatively impacts the organization. Surveys indicate that crises are prevalent in the sports industry. For instance, Delatte (2003) reported that 70% of professional and collegiate sports organizations experienced a crisis in 1997, highlighting the widespread nature of organizational challenges within the sector. Furthermore, research by Gorse and Chadwick (2010) documented over 2,000 cases of sports-related corruption between 2001 and 2010, underscoring the persistence of ethical and governance issues in sports over time. Recent evidence suggests that such issues continue to be significant. According to Sportradar Integrity Services (2023), 1,329 suspicious

matches were identified globally across 70 sports in 2023, with the majority occurring in men's competitions and in Europe, Asia, and South America. Although the proportion of suspicious matches is relatively low (approximately 0.2% of all monitored events), the absolute number of incidents remains considerable. Comparisons with historical data suggest that while the forms and detection of crises may have evolved, crises—ranging from corruption and match-fixing to broader organizational challenges—remain a persistent feature of the sports landscape.

Reputation management, "a public relations practice used to enhance or maintain an organization or brand image" (Delatte, 2003, p. 10), is critical because restoring a tarnished reputation is challenging (Delatte, 2003; Nakra, 2000). Organizational brand crises are diverse, including product failure, social responsibility gaps, misbehavior by executives or spokespeople, poor performance, and loss of public support (Greyser, 2009). Greyser (2009) identifies four areas for analyzing potential threats: brand elements, the crisis situation, organizational initiatives, and outcomes. In sports, the core of a brand is the "integrity of athletic competition" (Greyser, 2009, p. 593). Athlete-related crises are particularly detrimental because recovery is slow, and losses may be both immediate and long-term. Effective crisis management requires proactive preparation, strategic response, and post-crisis recovery.

Brand image rehabilitation relies on strategic communication and trust-building (Greyser, 2009). The crisis management model by Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) emphasizes continuous management from pre-crisis prevention to post-crisis monitoring. Effective strategies include rapid transparent communication (e.g., Tiger Woods scandal response), strategic planning during the crisis, and proactive identification of potential threats. In some cases, temporary withdrawal from public exposure, coupled with credible actions such as community engagement, can facilitate gradual restoration of public trust and organizational credibility.

2. Theories and Models in Crisis Management

Stakeholder theory provides a foundational framework for understanding crisis management. According to the theory, organizations must consider the interests of all stakeholder groups critical to their success (Ulmer, 2001). This perspective emphasizes prioritizing relationships with stakeholders rather than focusing solely on the organization itself. In the context of sports, this means that organizations should cultivate strong, credible relationships with sport fans, whose attitudes significantly influence brand image.

In addition to stakeholder theory, three fundamental social science theories offer insights into crisis management. First, structural-functional systems theory highlights the central role of organizational communication in preventing crises. Effective communication between leaders and employees can mitigate risks and maintain organizational stability (Dunlop, 1958). Second, Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory emphasizes the importance of disseminating information to employees during emergencies, enabling them to generate innovative solutions. Third, James' (2000) unequal human capital theory explains that inequalities among employees can precipitate crises by fostering the spread of rumors or damaging the organization's brand. Together, these theories provide a conceptual foundation for understanding and managing crises within organizations.

Effective crisis management in organizations has been conceptualized through several models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ramee, 1987; Marra, 1992; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995). Grunig and Hunt (1984) classified four public relations models: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. The first two models focus on transferring information to the public, with the second allowing some evaluation. The two-way asymmetrical model uses social science research to persuade public opinion, while the two-way symmetrical model integrates communication research and audience feedback into decision-making (Delatte, 2003).

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) proposed a four-phase crisis management model: issue management, planning-prevention, crisis, and post-crisis. This model assumes that crises are cyclical and emphasizes tailored strategies for each phase. Marra's (1992) public relations excellence model identifies strategies, techniques, and characteristics common to effective crisis responses (Delatte, 2003, p. 19). Ramee (1987) proposed a three-step process: preparation, crisis management, and post-crisis review, providing actionable guidelines for organizations at each stage. Collectively, these models suggest that crises should be addressed systematically rather than reactively. In sport, athlete-related crises should similarly be managed as a continuous process.

3. Crisis Management in Sport

Crisis management can be divided into two broad phases: pre-crisis and post-crisis management. Pre-crisis management involves identifying potential issues that may negatively impact the organization and includes two

sub-phases: issue management and planning-prevention. Issue management focuses on detecting potential athlete-related issues. These can be categorized as personal lifestyle issues, such as sex scandals, gambling, legal problems, or fraud, and sport-related issues, including match-fixing, doping, bribery, and embezzlement. Sports organizations can prevent such issues through educational programs and regular counseling for athletes. Planning-prevention involves developing strategies to prevent crises or minimize unavoidable impacts. Organizations with strong pre-existing relationships with stakeholders experience fewer negative consequences during crises (Delatte, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 1996). For sport organizations, cultivating positive relationships with fans is essential, as fans' attitudes strongly influence brand image. Effective pre-crisis management minimizes the potential damage to brand reputation.

During the crisis phase, organizations respond to emergent situations. Transparency is paramount; sports fans expect accurate and timely information. Delatte (2003) emphasizes that public perception, rather than objective facts, often shapes the crisis outcome. Concealment or misinformation can exacerbate damage to athlete and organizational brand images. Greyser (2009) notes that trust—built on performance, behavior, and credible communication—is fundamental to authenticity and reputation. He advocates forthright acknowledgment of problems, followed by consistent, trustworthy communication, as the most effective method for rehabilitating brand image.

Crisis response should also include effective public engagement. Organizations must prepare official announcements and coordinate social media responses according to the severity of the crisis. Highly impactful crises involving unethical or illegal behavior warrant active and transparent communication, while minor incidents may require more measured responses to avoid unnecessary negative attention. Compensation strategies should consider fan loyalty: highly loyal fans may respond better to sincere apologies and direct communication, whereas moderately or low-loyalty fans may require tangible compensation, such as ticket discounts or merchandise.

Post-crisis management focuses on monitoring brand reputation, fan perceptions, and ongoing athlete behavior. Rehabilitation of athlete brand image is gradual, as negative perceptions can persist long after a crisis. Organizations must continue transparent communication and credibility-building initiatives to shift fan attitudes over time.

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