

THEY SAID WHAT???

By Scott Fraser

Why You Need Public Relations!



As I write this, we are in the final countdown to this year's Super Bowl, arguably the biggest sporting event in this country and possibly beyond. The Super Bowl has been transformed from what started out as one single championship game, into a week-long celebration of events. And, if your team is involved in the big game, the media scrutiny is at least two weeks long.

This year, much of the lead-up discussion and media frenzy has been about whether or not the New England Patriots used footballs that met league air pressure specifications in their championship game against the Indianapolis Colts. (Full disclosure here, I am a life-long New England resident and sports fan.)

Rather than discuss the specifics of the controversy, which have been dealt with ad nauseum by well known, hard hitting national news and sports reporters, I want to address the public relations aspect of all this.

The controversy about under-inflated footballs erupted overnight, literally just a few hours after the Patriots won the AFC Championship. The first media report was posted between 2:00 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. I'm sure some of the players and team officials were probably just settling down for sleep after the exciting late night game.

I have tried to put myself in the position of the Patriots public relations spokesperson as he received a late night/early morning phone call about the blossoming controversy. I'm willing to bet his response was something similar to the name of this column, "They said what???"

A phone call like that jars you awake in a hurry and your brain immediately goes in to overdrive as you start devising a plan to address this negative story. The New England Patriots, whether you like

the team, the coach, the players or not, have a solid, well-respected and well-run public relations department.

I'm sure numerous high level meetings were held with team officials, ownership, coaches, players, equipment managers, etc. as a plan was set up for dealing with this controversy which seemed to lead every national news station broadcast for days on end.

Ultimately multiple news conferences were held by the team—two by Coach Bill Belichick, one each by quarterback Tom Brady and owner Robert Kraft. All denied any wrongdoing and denied any knowledge of how the footballs became underinflated. Despite all of these efforts, this has been the lead story of most national news and sports media leading up to the game.

The Patriots are no strangers to controversy. This probably actually helped them prepare in this case for handling the media frenzy.

So what does this all mean for you? Well, it should mean everything to anyone who puts together a major event, festival, concert, celebration, etc. It should be a warning as to how fast all of your preparations and good work can take a sudden turn and all head south.

In the case of the Patriots, nothing has been proven. Oh, there has been a lot of speculation. "Published reports" quoting "unnamed sources close to the

investigation" have made several serious allegations. But as of this writing, the NFL has yet to make a formal statement other than to say their investigation is ongoing.

So at this point, the Patriots are putting a lot of time and effort into defending as yet unsubstantiated allegations, although the facts will most definitely come to light at some time in the future.

This can happen to you. All of your best laid plans to highlight your upcoming event, to showcase performers, to promote the venue and spotlight the favorite activities of your customers and attendees, can come crashing down, literally overnight, with a well-placed news story that may only contain unconfirmed allegations.

If you have a public relations plan in place, you should have at least one component that addresses crisis communications. In fact, you should really have a separate crisis communications plan, but that is a story for another time.

If you have a good PR plan, you should be using it to highlight all of your good works on a year round basis. For instance, if yours is an annual music festival, you can build good public relations all throughout the year. How? Well, you can talk about the cooperation you have with your host city or venue. You can talk about the good work of your event volunteers and put out a call for more if you need them. You can announce the

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performers when they are signed. You can put out multiple releases leading up to the event talking about the various performances and venue or venues.

Your event itself is probably big enough to gain coverage as it takes place. After the event you can put out a release highlighting attendance (highest in 7 years, for example) number of performers, spectacular weather, or anything else which came out of the event. Then, maybe you make some community contributions with a portion of your proceeds. This is certainly worthy of a news release or two, as you present a scholarship to a student or make a contribution to a community agency.

All of this builds your "bank account" of good public relations. Your goal is always to conduct yourself, your organization and your event(s) in such a way that it will build a stable of positive feelings toward the event.

That way, if you get an early morning phone call one day that causes you to say "They said what???" you will have enough reserve built up to combat any negative PR that may come your way.

As for the Patriots? If they win the Super Bowl, haters will say they didn't deserve it, fans will say they overcame adversity. If they lose, detractors will say they couldn't play with regulation footballs, and fans will say they were distracted by the adverse publicity. Just another day in the life of being a New England sports fan.

May your event be free of such controversy. But, may you also be prepared, just in case.

Scott Fraser is a veteran communications professional with more than 30 years' experience. As principal of Fraser Communications Group, he provides public relations, media relations and crisis communications advice for his clients who range from small non-profits, to international corporations. He has been hired to protect the reputations of companies in crisis, and gain positive public exposure for clients ranging from an emerging high tech company to established organizations in industry and healthcare. Sought after as a public speaker, Fraser also is an adjunct professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI, teaching courses in Crisis Communications and Public Relations. You can reach Scott at: sfraser@frasercomm.com, (401) 647-3444 and follow him @frasercomm on Twitter.