
FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY, STING LIKE A BEE



BACK IN 1964, MUHAMMAD ALI GRASPED THE POWER OF GOOD COMMUNICATIONS WHEN HIS FAMOUS REMARK HELPED PROPEL HIM TO ICONIC STATUS. TODAY, SPORT'S GOVERNING BODIES ARE LEARNING TO DO THE SAME

BY TOM WILLIAMS AND ROB PINKER

Before his 1964 fight with Sonny Liston, Cassius Clay, the man who later became Muhammad Ali, was asked how he would approach the bout with the “unbeatable” world heavyweight champion. Clay famously responded: “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Your hands can’t hit what your eyes can’t see.” No one, except perhaps Ali himself, could have predicted that this remark would help propel him to near mythic status.

Clay was not the only sports figure who had a way with words. We all remember legends such as American football’s Vince “we didn’t lose the game, we just ran out of time” Lombardi, or soccer’s Diego “the goal was scored... by the hand of God” Maradona. More recently, we have had others, such as sprinter Usain “I blew the world’s mind” Bolt.

Instinctively, these masters of the soundbite all understood that they had a brand to manage and develop, and that through effective communications with the media they could do so while also contributing to their sport’s marketability.

This new millennium has seen the ability of sporting individuals to manage the media develop even further. Soccer player David Beckham, for example, has built a global brand on good looks, a talented right foot, an excellent work ethic and impressive control of the media. Tiger Woods has done so through the sheer force of his talent.

Many soccer players have had to confront damaging reports about their private lives in recent times. Their approach has almost always been denial and refusal to comment.

However, when Woods faced a similar situation, he chose to face the allegations with an admission of guilt and carefully controlled displays of contrition. Only time will tell which is the more successful strategy.

Although sports stars were quick to grasp the benefits of managing the media, the men with MBAs who are responsible for running and governing sport have been slower to see the correlation between strong control of the media and a more marketable product. It seems incredible that they took so long to wise up, especially given the symbiotic relationship between sport and the media.

But times are changing. Sport’s governing bodies now recognize the importance of effective communications to engage fans, attract more corporate involvement and sponsorship, and protect the reputation of the sport itself.

The recent FIFA World Cup in South Africa was hailed as a resounding success (unless you were French, Italian or English). This was, in large measure, because the organizers realized that they not only had to get it right, but had to communicate that they were getting it right. What team South Africa and FIFA did so successfully during the World Cup was engage a whole nation in a sport.

Whether sporting bodies have become more attractive to corporations because they now understand how the media works, or the governing bodies have become more media friendly because corporations are more involved, is open to debate (we suspect it is the latter). What is irrefutable is the omnipresent nature of corporate branding at every big sporting event.

Of course, sponsorship would exist even if sporting bodies did not engage with the media. But organizers now understand that effective, professional communication makes you even more attractive to potential sponsors.

At last, governing bodies have realized that a sport’s reputation is fragile and needs to be protected. Sport is not new to crisis but governing bodies are increasingly handling such occurrences professionally. To illustrate the point, we turn to an unusual choice: snooker. Snooker, for the uninitiated, is a game like pool, and second only to darts in terms of its level of inactivity. Until recently, this could also be said of its communication efforts.

Nevertheless, snooker’s governing body reacted very professionally to recent allegations of match-fixing. They moved quickly and decisively, took control, set up an “integrity unit” to investigate the problem, and announced a date for completion of the investigation. Most importantly, they were open and honest with the media. This gave them an element of control over news coverage, and their handling of the crisis provides a case study in professional communications.

Governing bodies are making progress with the media, but they could do worse than turn to the “Louisville Lip” for further inspiration. As Ali said: “I figured that if I said it enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest.” 🍷

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