

Running Head: NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

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The National Football League's Domestic Violence Controversy

Social media has made news spread faster, people feel closer, and the whole world feel so much smaller. It also makes crises and controversy much larger. The use of hashtags makes issues and topics trend and this can mean very good or very bad news for the organization involved. Social media played a great part in the Baltimore Raven's Ray Rice controversy in the National Football League that is still a continuing crisis for the league. The NFL is a professional American sports league consisting of 32 teams equally divided between the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC). It is an unincorporated non-profit 501(c) (6) association. The league itself is not for-profit, but each of its 32 teams are which leads to its combined worth of over 45 billion U.S. dollars (Keenan 2014). The NFL is financed by its teams and considers itself a trade organization. The NFL was formed in 1920 and was then called the American Professional Football Conference (APFC). The name was changed to the NFL in 1922. The current commissioner and chief executive officer (CEO) of the NFL is Roger Goodell, who has received a multitude of negative responses from the public with how he has dealt with this controversy. This analysis looks at the NFL, the Baltimore Ravens, Rice, Janay Palmer, and the public's response to the aggravated assault charges against Rice and how it was dealt with within the NFL and the Ravens team management (Chronology 2013).

Overview of the Case:

On February 15, 2014, Rice and his then fiancé Janay Palmer were involved in a fight in an elevator of a casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They were both arrested and each charged with assault. Most thought it was as simple as that until a few days later when TMZ released a video of Rice dragging an unconscious Palmer out of the elevator in which the incident had occurred. On March 27, 2014 Rice was indicted by the Atlantic County grand jury on a charge of

third-degree aggravated assault. The charge against Palmer was dropped. The next day the couple was married. In May, Rice pleaded not guilty to the charges. Later that month he was accepted into a diversionary program (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Friedman 2014) (Bien 2014) (Downing 2014).

In July the NFL announced a two game suspension for Rice for violating their personal conduct policy. On top of this suspension, Rice was fined \$58,000. This soft punishment outraged many and several individuals such as U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal, Tammy Baldwin, and Chris Murphy sent letters to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodall demanding harsher punishment for Rice. Others also described their frustration on social media saying that the NFL did not take domestic and interpersonal violence seriously. Only one month later, the NFL announced it was toughening its stand on domestic violence and announced that players who violated this policy would face a six game suspension (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Durand 2014) (Almasy & Friedman 2014) (Fitzgerald 2014) (Pluto 2014).

On September 8, 2014 when TMZ released surveillance video of inside the elevator everything blew up and the public was even more enraged. The video was intensely violent. It showed Rice punching Palmer and knocking her out. Hours after the video was released, the Baltimore Ravens terminated Rice's contract and commissioner Goodell announced that Rice was suspended indefinitely. Goodell told the public that the NFL had no knowledge of the video before it was released. TMZ and a law enforcement official in New Jersey said otherwise. They both said that the video was sent to the NFL and they never did anything about it. Rice appealed his indefinite suspension on September 16. His appeal hearing was held on November 5 and 6, 2014 (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Friedman 2014) (Bien 2014) (Pelissero 2014) (Ray Rice 2014).

Research Questions

Since this case is still ongoing, some questions are going to be lacking a comprehensive answer and some reactions are still to be seen in full. Throughout the rest of this controversy, much of the NFL and Baltimore Raven's response is still to be seen in the future. This analysis focuses on responses through September 2014.

RQ1): What type of crisis communication and management tactics did the NFL use to handle the situation?

There are several steps an organization or company can take in minimizing a crisis before it actually happens. One is by conducting a risk assessment that identifies potential problem areas within the organization. Being familiar with the internal reports and consumer relations activity can help with preventing crises before they happen. Companies can also learn from others' mistakes by paying attention to crises that happen around them (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-113).

When a crisis cannot be prevented, there are certain proactive crisis response strategies that companies can follow. There is a preemptive strategy often called a prebuttal when a company is quick to be the first one to tell the story of the crisis in order to set the mood for future storytellers like news outlets and the public (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-113).

Offensive response strategies consist of attacking the accuser, embarrassment, and threat. Attacking the accuser is when the company attacks the reasoning or evidences of the accuser. The tactic of embarrassment is when the company uses disgrace or degradation to diminish the accuser's influence on the public. The tactic of threat is when the organization intimidates the accuser with a lawsuit or negative coverage (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-113).

Defensive response strategies consist of denial, excuse, and justification. The denial tactic is when the organization denies the problem exists at all. The excuse tactic is when the company minimizes their responsibility in the crisis. The justification tactic is when the vastness of the crisis is minimalized or the company shifts the blame onto another person (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-113).

Diversionsary response strategies include concession, ingratiation, disassociation, and relabeling. The concession tactic is when the company gives their publics something they want in order to begin repairing the relationship. This usually pertains to more than one group that want different things. The tactic of ingratiation is when direct action is taken to appease the consumers, like giving them a discount or coupons. The tactic of disassociation is when the company distances itself from the wrongdoer. The tactic of relabeling is when the company begins creating a new name for their product or service (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-114).

Vocal commiseration strategies include concern, condolence, regret, and apology. The tactic of concern is when the company does not confess that they are at fault, but they do show concern for the situation at hand. Condolence is when the company gives a formal response like a press conference and they show that they feel for those involved in the crisis, but they still do not admit any guilt. The tactic of regret, according to Ronald Smith, “involves admitting sorrow and remorse for a situation.” The company could admit their guilt in this situation, or they could not. The apology tactic is when the company takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks the public for their forgiveness (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-114).

Rectifying behavior strategies include investigation, corrective action, restitution, and repentance. The tactic of investigation is when the company launches an official investigation into the problem taking place. The tactic of corrective action is when steps are taken to prevent

the same type of crisis from happening in the future. The tactic of restitution is when the company offers compensation to those affected or some sort of restoration to the previous state. Repentance is when an organization admits fault for the crisis and agrees to alter its practices that led to that situation (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-114).

Strategic inaction is also a route that a company could choose to take in a wake of a crisis. The primary tactic for this strategy is silence. The company does not say anything and waits for the problem to blow over. Sometimes this is done with a “no comment” or a short statement saying why they will not respond, if say, it is to protect their consumers or employees (Swann, 2010, pp. 111-115).

RQ2): How did social media affect the NFL and the controversy?

Consumer relations is an important part of crisis communication and management. Keeping up marketing-communication efforts in order to build customer demand and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with the customers are the two main areas of consumer relations. Media relations is closely related with this because companies want consumers to see them in the media. The problem comes when the media connotes negativity with the organization. When the media outlets begin reporting negatively on a company, this could be the beginning of the crisis. If the story becomes big and people start talking about it on social media, even more people will hear about the company negatively. Consumer relations and social media go hand in hand when it comes to how the public views a company and it can greatly affect their reputation (Swann, 2010, pp. 152-155).

Method

The method used to analyze this case will be news reports, journals, magazines, and social networking. Controlled and uncontrolled media reports both need to be analyzed in order to fully investigate and understand this case. The majority of reports showed statements made by commissioner Goodell of the NFL, the Baltimore Ravens, Rice, and Palmer. There were also statements made by high profile politicians, celebrities, and the general public on social media, blogs, and news outlets. Most of the reports on social networking showed the opinions and outrage of football fans and the general public. News reports also frequently went to Twitter and Instagram to show the views of citizens on the topic. The topic was trending on Twitter and hashtags like #BoycottNFL and #GoodellMustGo showed how outraged the public was on how the NFL was handling the matter.

Analysis/Report of Findings

In March after the initial video of Rice dragging Palmer out of the elevator was released and he was charged with an aggravated assault, the Baltimore Ravens issued the following statement: "This is part of the due process for Ray. We know there is more to Ray Rice than this one incident." Rice faced a two game suspension put forth by Goodell, and the NFL was attacked by the public because of their lax policy when it came to domestic violence. Letters were sent to Goodell by prominent senators and the public announced their disapproval through social media outlets. A month later, commissioner Goodell responded to these attacks with a rectifying behavior strategy of corrective action. He created a new six game suspension policy for players who violated the personal conduct policy on domestic violence. (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Durand 2014) (Bien 2014) (Fitzgerald 2014) (Pluto 2014).

The Baltimore Ravens held a press conference with Rice and Palmer and live tweeted the entire event. During this event Rice apologized. Palmer also apologized stating: “I do deeply regret the role that I played in the incident that night, but I can say that I am happy that we continue to work through it together...” Many questioned Palmer’s apology and asked if the Baltimore Ravens had anything to do with it in order to protect Rice’s reputation. It has been recently revealed that the Baltimore Ravens supplied Palmer with a suggested script asking her to apologize for her role in the incident before the very first press conference that Palmer and Rice were a part of. While Palmer might have regretted her part of the argument, the Baltimore Ravens should not have prompted her to apologize in this incident. A tweet that was sent out that night by the Baltimore Ravens stated: “Janay Rice says she deeply regrets the role she played the night of the incident”. The tweet was later deleted after another video was released in September (DeIvecchio 2014) (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Friedman 2014) (Full Transcript 2014).

In mid-September after the second video was released by TMZ, Rice was suspended indefinitely from the NFL. The NFL made a wise decision here, but the public was still focused on their delayed reaction. Goodell told the public that the NFL had no knowledge of the video before it was released. TMZ and a law enforcement official in New Jersey said otherwise. They both said that the video was sent to the NFL and they never did anything about it. “We had not seen any videotape of what occurred in the elevator. We assumed that there was a video. We asked for video. We asked for anything that was pertinent. But we were never granted that opportunity,” Goodell said. When asked how TMZ was able to get their hands on the video and the NFL was not, Goodell stated: “I don’t know how TMZ or any other website gets their information. We are particularly reliant on law enforcement — that’s the most reliable. It’s the most credible. And we don’t seek to get that information from sources that are un-credible.”

TMZ responded to this claim by stating: “Sources who worked at the casino at the time of the incident tell us ... if the NFL had asked for the video, they would have gladly complied,” TMZ reported. The Associated Press reported on September 10 that a law enforcement official in New Jersey told them he sent a DVD with a copy of the elevator video to an NFL office in April. On April 9 he received a voice mail telling him that the video was received. According to the officer at least one person watched it and told him, "You're right. It's terrible." The NFL had knowledge of the video before it was released to the public in September according to the law enforcement official and a voicemail he has on his phone from an NFL office number. "We are not aware of anyone in our office who possessed or saw the video before it was made public on Monday," stated NFL spokesman Greg Aiello on September 10. The NFL received even more animosity after the video came out on their failure to investigate the situation and punish Rice initially. The public thought that if the NFL knew about the video and the extent of the violence, Rice's initial punishment should have been harsher (Almasy 2014) (Almasy & Durand 2014) (Almasy & Friedman 2014) (Bien 2014) (CBS 2014) (Fitzgerald 2014) (Pelissero 2014) (Pluto 2014) (Ray Rice 2014).

The hashtags #BoycottNFL and #GoodellMustGo began trending on Twitter. It was unclear who originally started the hashtags, but they gained media attention almost immediately. The public called on others to boycott the NFL and their sponsors with the hashtag #BoycottNFL. Many others were saying that Goodell should resign because of the way he has handled the entire Rice case. Individuals would state their reasons why and then hashtag #GoodellMustGo. A women's rights group called Ultraviolet flew “Goodell Must Go” banners over three different NFL stadiums on Sunday September 14. "It is time for Roger Goodell to resign, and for the NFL to get serious about its commitment to ending violence against

women within the league," Ultraviolet co-founder Nita Chaudhary stated. "In a country where a woman is battered every 9 seconds and 1 in 4 women experience domestic violence in their lifetime, we simply cannot afford to have an NFL commissioner who doesn't take this issue seriously." (Almasy 2014) (Greenburg 2014).

Discussion/Limitations

Since this controversy is still ongoing and will continue to go on until the public thinks that the NFL is appropriately handling the situation, it is hard to tell what the final outcome will be. More news articles are released on the topic every single day and the public is still voicing their outrage on social media outlets. In order to fully evaluate and analyze this crisis, further analyzing must be done as the situation continues to progress and eventually closes. This is the biggest limitation to this analysis. We do not currently have all of the information available because it is still coming in.

Future analysis should not only analyze news media, journals, magazines, and public opinion through social media, but also survey NFL fans closely to determine if and how many fans had been affected and lost by the crisis. Quantitative and qualitative surveys and focus groups should be implemented in order to gauge the public's view of the NFL before and after the crisis took place. Did the incident have any real effect on NFL viewers? Were there actual boycotts going on or were people just tweeting about it? More analysis should be done on actions taken by the public.

Conclusion

The NFL is still combatting the intense negative response they are receiving from the public, news media, and activist groups. It is unclear at this time how badly the NFL has handled

the Rice case, but at this moment, its reputation is definitely plummeting. The reputation of commissioner Goodell is also extremely low. When the public is calling for your CEO to resign, it is clear that things are not being handled well. The NFL must reevaluate their crisis communication and management strategies in order to gain back the trust of their publics and create a positive image for themselves again.

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