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# How should sports organizations handle a crisis?: a focus on collegiate institutions

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HOW SHOULD SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS  
HANDLE A CRISIS?: A FOCUS ON COLLEGIATE INSTITUTIONS

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
Master of Mass Communication

in

Theanship School of Mass Communication

By  
Jamie Mabile Delatte  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1993  
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## ABSTRACT

The sports industry is big business just like any other big business. Sports organizations face various crises just as corporate America does. A survey of 345 professional and college level sports organizations revealed that 70% of them experienced a crisis in 1997, while the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 220 college athletes were the focus of criminal charges in 1995.

“Sports crises are clearly more frequent today than ever before,” said Kathleen Hessert. Mike Paul agrees with that trend based on his research, attributing the trend to poor life choices away from the sport.

What is a crisis? A crisis is a situation that disrupts normal business operations, and has an uncertain and a potentially negative outcome. What are some crises within the sports industry? Crises can range from criminal charges, labor disputes, arena/stadium issues, politically incorrect statements or actions, accidental deaths and workplace violence.

This thesis will examine how nine public relations practitioners in the sports industry handle crises, and compare the findings to the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model. The nine sports organizations interviewed will gain insight into their practices concerning crises, thus, giving them the opportunity to improve communications with their publics whereby mutually valuable relationships can be formed.

The findings of this thesis seem to support certain aspects of the crisis management model, however, none of the organizations follow the model exactly. The inability of all of these organizations to implement more proactive public relations or to conduct formal research causes these organizations to operate in a reactionary mode.

The findings of this thesis point out the areas in which these sports organizations indeed do follow the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model, and points out the areas in which

these organizations' performance is lacking. The areas tended to be planning and research.

Although these findings cannot be generalized to all sports organizations, those organizations can use these findings as an educational tool in which to enhance their own operations.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The sports industry is big business just like any other big business (Brand, 2001; Eitzen, 1997; Farrelly, Quester & Burton, 1997). Sports organizations face various crises just as corporate America does. A survey of 345 professional and college level sports organizations revealed that 70% of them experienced a crisis in 1997 (Krupa, 1998; Sports Media Challenge, 1998), while the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 220 college athletes were the focus of criminal charges in 1995 (Eitzen, 1997).

A study of ten Division I universities “found that while male student-athletes comprised 3% of the total male population, they represented 35% of the reported perpetrators” in crimes against women (Eitzen, 1997, ¶ 37). A national study of 13,000 students echoed that when it revealed male athletes are three and a half times more likely than non-athlete males to admit to having committed date rape (Eitzen, 1997).

“Sports crises are clearly more frequent today than ever before,” said Kathleen Hessert (Krupa, 1998, p. 1). Mike Paul agrees with that trend based on his research attributing the incline to poor life choices away from the sport (Business Wire, 2000).

What is a crisis? A crisis is a situation that disrupts normal business operations, and has an uncertain and a potentially negative outcome (Fearn-Banks, 1996). What are some crises within the sports industry? Crises can range from criminal charges, labor disputes, arena/stadium issues, politically incorrect statements or actions, accidental deaths and workplace violence (Sports Media Challenge, n.d.).

This thesis will examine how nine public relations practitioners in the sports industry handle crises and compare the findings to a crisis management model. The nine sports organizations interviewed will gain insight into their practices concerning crises, thus, giving them the

opportunity to improve communications with their publics whereby mutually valuable relationships can be formed. Although the findings of this thesis are limited to only the nine organizations interviewed, other organizations within the same industry can take notice and compare the findings to their own operations. Whether or not these nine organizations are adhering to a crisis management model should be of interest to them, as well as other organizations in their industry. Based on the findings of this thesis the organizations in question and those within the same industry will not only be able to identify their strengths, but also their weaknesses. The weaknesses can then be corrected if they so choose.

This thesis, therefore, is fulfilling what Thomas Bender (1993) says about academia aiding society in its issues. Although sports public relations and sports crisis management is somewhat new to academia, Bender said academia should not seek refuge from the world in universities, but should use its knowledge to help society with its issues even if the issues are obscure to academia. Bender said, historically, academia participated in society and its issues, but has withdrawn into its university halls to research safe, popular topics. Other academic researchers may realize, after reading this thesis, the value of researching the sports industry; thus sparking more inquiry into sports public relations and sports crisis management.

This thesis brings forth a topic less researched, yet important to society and businesses, which spend billions of dollars on it annually (Farrelly, Quester & Burton, 1997; IEG SR, 2003; Kate, 1992; Sports Media Challenge, 1998). The importance of the sports industry lies with the amount of money, time and emphasis now put on it by society.

Since this thesis does bring forth a topic less researched, it will also add to the body of knowledge regarding sports crisis management and sports public relations. Much has been written regarding crisis management (Adams, 2000; Brewton, 1987; Briggs, 1990; Clark, 1986; Duhe &



Zoch, 1994; Fearn-Banks, 1994, 1996; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Greenberg, 1993; Marshall, 1986; Modzelewski, 1990; Nowotny, 1989; Sklarewitz, 1991; Stanton, 1989) and public relations (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Crawford, 2003; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1994; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Harris, 1998; Miller, 1999; Nakra, 2000; Spicer, 1997; Young, 1995). Most of the crisis management literature deals with case studies on how an organization handled a crisis and what lessons were learned from the situation, yet none specifically deal with sports crises, which are abundant. Some of the crisis management literature provides models to follow when faced with a crisis. The public relations literature defines public relations' various roles, stresses the importance of relationship building and maintenance between the organization and its publics. Since crisis management is part of public relations, then a thesis regarding crisis management will also add to the public relations literature.

In addition to the crisis management and public relations literature, there are many articles and studies regarding sports sponsorship, sports marketing and sports journalism (Anderson, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Fortunato, 2000; Harris, 1998; Lester-Roushazmir & Raman, 1999; Lynn, 1987; Madrigal, 2000; McCleneghan, 2000; Mullen & Mazzocco, 2000; Wanta & Kunz, 1997); yet little that specifically deal with sports crisis management (Anderson, 2001c, 2003; Cutlip, 1989) and sports public relations (Anderson, 2001a; 2001c; 2003; Cutlip, 1989; Fortunato, 2000).

This thesis will add to the sports crisis management and sports public relations bodies of knowledge, and will provide valuable insights to public relations practitioners on how nine sports organizations handle their crises. Based on the findings of the interviews and the subsequent comparison to a crisis management model, the nine organizations interviewed will be able to determine their weaknesses and their strengths, whereby corrections can be implemented for future crises. The findings of this thesis will be shared with the nine organizations interviewed, whereby

the organizations can learn its weaknesses and strengths, as well as how the other eight organizations handle a crisis. In addition to being beneficial to the nine organizations interviewed, this thesis will also benefit all of those within the sports industry. Since crises are abundant, many other sports organizations can compare their actions to those interviewed and learn from others.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Public Relations

There are many definitions of public relations with most defining it as maintaining a relationship with a public, whether it is investors, the media, employees, customers, the general public or the government. The many definitions of public relations contain words like “mutual,” “reciprocal” and “between” to describe the relationships an organization has with its publics (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Harris, 1998; Spicer, 1997).

A less specific, yet accurate, definition according to Christopher Spicer (1997) is “the primary function of organizational public relations is to continually align the organization with elements in its environment” (p. 69).

Rex F. Harlow, a long-time public relations scholar and leader, collected and analyzed over 472 definitions of public relations in order to give a definitive definition.

Public Relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p. 4).

This definition covers almost every function of public relations. Harlow was attempting to include both conceptual and operational elements to the definition, thereby including respectively

both theoretical terms to be used by academia, and practical terms, to be used by public relations practitioners (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000).

There are different types of public relations such as investor relations, which deals with an organization and its investors; internal and external relations, which deals with an organization and its employees and other publics, respectively; lobbying, which deals with special interest groups and government officials and governmental public affairs, which deals with public entities and its publics (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). A public relations practitioner has to build and maintain an image and relationship with the appropriate publics, which is what most public relations practitioners do for any organization (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Harris, 1998; Spicer, 1997).

### **Sports Public Relations**

Sports public relations, however, includes the sports element in the public relations mix, which makes the handling of issues just a little different. Sports public relations deals with a sports organization or an individual sports figure, which is usually of celebrity status and thereby scrutinized by the media. The media highlights every little thing that occurs within the organization or individual's life, whereas some organizations do not face this type of scrutiny (Krupa, 1998; Sports Media Challenge, 1992).

Several articles and studies in academic journals discussing sports sponsorship, sports marketing and sports journalism were found (Anderson, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Fortunato, 2000; Harris, 1998; Lynn, 1987; Madrigal, 2000; McCleneghan, 2000; Mullen & Mazzocco, 2000; Lester-Roushazmir & Raman, 1999; Wanta & Kunz, 1997); yet only four academic articles addressed sports public relations and crises (Anderson, 2001c, 2003; Cutlip, 1989; Fortunato, 2000).

Scott Cutlip (1989) researched the history of the baseball commissioner's position. Cutlip discovered Albert Lasker, the father of modern advertising and a public relations genius, resolved the bad publicity baseball was receiving because of the Black Sox Scandal of 1919-1920 by creating the baseball commissioner's position. Many players, managers and owners were corrupt and taking bribes to throw games. The commissioner's position, originated as a public relations position to halt the abuses occurring in baseball, and became one of authority that gave creditability to the sport, thus saving baseball's reputation. This article involved a sports crisis as well as a sports public relations problem and solution.

Two historical articles concerning baseball's image were found. One dealt with how the organizations used public relations to build legitimacy within the industry, and how that affected the development of corporate public relations (Anderson, 2003). A more relevant article examined the public relations and crises that baseball was experiencing. The article discusses the 1919 Black Sox scandal, along with team owner's eagerness to have baseball portrayed as the national pastime. The owners used public relations to achieve that goal by appointing a commissioner and developing a press office to influence the sporting press (Anderson, 2001c).

A study concerning sports, public relations and agenda setting by the media, reviewed the public relations and promotional strategies of the National Basketball Association (NBA). By analyzing mass media content concerning the NBA, the researcher found that the NBA was more in control of the content than the media, thereby negating the presumed media agenda setting theory (Fortunato, 2000).

A couple of articles in *Christian Science Monitor* discuss sports crises, and how sports organizations should deal with athletes' bad behavior. One article focused on an incident where a player, upset by a bad call, spit in an umpire's face and made reference to his dead son. Since the

player was key to the team's playoff chances, the manager allowed him to continue playing while both sides battled things out in court. Ultimately, the team issued a statement from the player along with a check to a charity to fight the disease that killed the umpire's son. The author of the article feels the baseball team missed an excellent opportunity to gain many new fans, and to turn the team overnight into America's team (Pondiscio, 1996).

The second article's focus was how teams dealt with well-known players who abused their spouses. The author feels the sports industry is not doing enough to curb this type of violence. The article cited a U.S. Surgeon General Report and a Los Angeles Times survey, which respectively reported the number one cause of injury to women in the United States is spousal abuse and the leading crime among professional athletes is violence against women (Bowers, 1997).

An article similar in nature discussed the double standard well-known male athletes have over female athletes. This article focused on a case in Nebraska where a star football player assaulted a female athlete, yet the football player was reinstated to the team because of his need for structure, stability and support. The female athlete lost her scholarship and was removed from the team, because her performance dropped (McCallum & Kennedy, 1996).

Two articles found in a popular literature magazine discussed problems within sports leagues. One league, the National Hockey League (NHL,) has publicity problems or lack of publicity. NHL has produced its own Web site in order to give fans more news and statistics concerning the sport. The league feels traditional, mainstream media doesn't do a good job of covering hockey, therefore, the league feels they are filling a void for the fans, which are visiting the site by the thousands (Kennedy, 2000).

The second article discussed the public relations problems of the National Basketball Association (NBA), and how the NBA addresses its players' behavior problems. The NBA is the

only professional sport, which has an educational program for its rookie players. The mandatory program covers life skill topics such as management of money and time, in addition to skits that demonstrate the importance of wise decisions. Many speakers are brought in for these topics, along with publicity specialists for image polishing (McCallum, Kennedy & Bechtel, 2003).

A couple of articles discussed major college sports programs and their effect on higher education. The authors focused on crises caused by student-athlete behavior and on how commercialized the programs have become. The athletes are called entertainers that are bringing in big money for their schools, which are increasingly focusing on athletics at the expense of academics. Both authors call for more consequences and for reform (Brand, 2001; Eitzen, 1997). A third article in *USA Today Magazine* addressed the same issues, claiming college athletics are driven by cupidity. The article cited incidences to prove its point, and called for reform (Gee, 1990).

## **Sponsorship**

Sponsorship, a form of public relations, is defined and discussed in articles by Robert Madrigal (2000) and Donna Lynn (1987). Madrigal (2000) defines sponsorships as “an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity” (p. 13).

Sports sponsorship, one of the most popular types of event sponsorship, accounts for two-thirds of event sponsorship with U.S. corporations spending \$2.2 billion in 1992 (Kate, 1992). A recent IEG Sponsorship Report says sports sponsorship has a far lead at \$6.43 billion over the next category, entertainment tours, with \$865 million (IEG SR, 2002).

Once title sponsorship in golf, tennis and NASCAR were the only sports that received sponsorship. With organizations now trying to reach a younger audience, sponsorships have

expanded to include football games, beach volleyball and extreme sports. A popular event to sponsor now is charitable runs and walks, adding to an organization's positive image (Harris, 1998). Even The North American Croquet Association has a sponsor, Rolex. Athletes are being used as living billboards, and consumers are listening (Kate, 1992).

Sponsored events, with most being sports events, draw attention to not only the sponsoring company, but also the sports organization or individual (Kate, 1992; Harris, 1998). With a partnership between a sponsor and a sports organizations or individual athlete, there is a potential for a crisis for both parties. When a crisis does occur, for example the death of Dale Earnhardt, not only did NASCAR have to deal with the crisis, but also, Earnhardt's sponsoring organizations (O'Briant, 2001; Poole, 2001).

In addition to his definition, Madrigal (2000) says sponsorships are used for increasing brand awareness and for linking the brand with an event, cause or team that creates favorable feelings for the brand. The Miller Brewing Co., one of the most active sports sponsoring companies in the U.S., agrees, and claims its research shows "it increases awareness of our brands and enhances [our] image" (Kate, 1995, p. 50).

Lynn (1987) lists public relations goals for event sponsoring as image building, market expansion, increased sales and good community relations. When consumers feel positively towards a brand, they are more apt to purchase products from that brand. This type of public relations can be categorized as reputation management.

### **Reputation Management**

Reputation management is a public relations practice used to enhance or maintain an organization or brand image (Harris, 1998; Nakra, 2000). Public relations departments that practice reputation management are there to build or maintain a positive image for an organization (Fearn-



Banks, 1996; Harris, 1998). A positive reputation is golden, worth nurturing, and once tarnished, incredibly difficult to recover (Nakra, 2000).

Creating and maintaining an image is increasingly more important for athletes than talent. Besides the media attention that requires a positive image, the opportunities in sponsorship money also requires a positive image, thereby reinforcing the importance of reputation management for the organization or individual (Sports Media Challenge, 1992).

An organization or individual with a good reputation is given more freedom to operate as it sees fit. Interdependence is created. Interdependence occurs when the organization's publics trust the organization, thereby allowing the organization more freedom in its operations (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Nakra, 2000; Young, 1995).

In addition to creating interdependence, another benefit of a good reputation is that when the organization experiences a crisis, it will be less severe. Public relations professionals refer to this as COD: credibility on deposit (Young, 1995). An organization whose publics trust them are given the benefit of the doubt when a crisis occurs; thereby, allowing the public relations professional to have credibility on deposit. During a crisis, publics are more forgiving of an organization with a good image (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Nakra, 2000; Young, 1995).

An organization that wants a good reputation must build it based on mutual relationships, therefore, the organization needs to start listening to its publics (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Young, 1995). Developing relationships takes time and is some of the most important public relations practices that one can perform (Crawford, 2003). Actions speak louder than words; publics believe and trust action more than insincere words. Everyone in the organization needs to be involved in reputation and relationship building, whereby a loyalty to the organization by the publics is created (Ledingham, 2001; Young, 1995).

## **Issues Management**

An organization that practices issues management can sometimes prevent the need to withdraw from the credibility on deposit. Issues management “is the proactive process of anticipating, identifying, evaluating and responding to public policy issues that affect organizations’ relationships with their publics” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000. p. 17). In addition, issues management is the searching of trends or issues that might affect the organization in the future, whereby steps are needed to adjust the organization to place it in a better situation (Miller, 1999). An example of issues management is the death of Dale Earnhardt, a NASCAR driver who died while racing. NASCAR and individual race teams took the issue of safety and applied it to their organizations. These organizations scanned the environment for relevant information and then applied the information to their organization to possibly prevent future crises.

If issues management is performed correctly a potential crisis is averted, thereby there is no need for crisis management, which makes issues management a preventative technique for crises. In issues management the public relations department becomes aware of an issue that could possibly affect the organization, and takes steps to mitigate the issue before it escalates. Early identification and early intervention are most crucial (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Spicer, 1997).

Environmental scanning, a research technique used in issues management, is the gathering of pertinent information regarding the organization and the organization’s publics. Monitoring the industry environment, trends and issues and aligning the organization with this new information can prevent potential disaster. This gathering of information can be done informally, through

networking with those within the same industry, or formally, with focus groups, surveys, content analysis or interviews. The information gathered then can be used to avert a potential crisis (Miller, 1999).

Sometimes information gathered during environmental scanning is not truthful. Organizations should not ignore this information. Rumors can be just as disastrous as real events (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000). Pepsi had a rumor regarding syringes found in Pepsi-Cola cans. People were inserting the syringes in the cans after opening them, but the people were telling the media that they opened the can and the syringe popped up (Fearn-Banks, 1996; Greenberg, 1993). Many times rumors are ignored because of their falsehood, but perception is reality. Strategies to overcome rumors should also be devised (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1996). Pepsi had a full-fledge crisis on its hands, even though the company knew the stories were hoaxes. Pepsi knew syringes could not have been put in the cans prior to their sealing, because they knew the canning process would not allow it; however, this did not stop the crisis Pepsi had to face (Fearn-Banks, 1996; Greenberg, 1993).

## **Research**

Public relations practitioners rely on research to justify their value. Organizations want to know what they are getting for their money (Wiesendanger, 1994).

Research can be primary, generating original data by using surveys, focus groups, content analysis or interviews, or secondary research, using established data such as demographics and psychographics (Harris, 1998). Surveys are the cheapest, easiest means of research while also providing newsworthy information that garners free publicity (Wiesendanger, 1994). Many surveys are done twice, once at the beginning of a campaign called a baseline, to benchmark where the

organization began and then repeated at the end of the campaign to determine where the organization is now. This type of research is referred to as evaluation or measurement (PR News, 2003).

Another form of research, environmental scanning, is used by public relations practitioners to identify strategic publics and trends within the organization's industry. Once issues and publics are identified, strategic plans can be put into action to prevent situations or crises from occurring. This practice is referred to as issues management. Organizations that use environmental scanning can expect to have long-term positive relationships with their publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

“Virtually every public relations planning model begins and ends with research” (Harris, 1998, p. 232). In addition, research is commonly conducted during the program to assess the progress, altering the plan if need arises (Harris, 1998).

## **Crisis Management**

Crisis management is the strategic or logistical planning for a crisis which removes some of the risk, thereby allowing the organization to operate more freely and with less damage from the negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

On the other hand, crisis communications is the actual verbal and written communication between the organization and the publics prior, during and after management of a crisis. The communications are designed to enhance the organization's image and minimize the damage from the negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Most of the crisis management literature provided examples or cases that examined methods of addressing crises (Adams, 2000; Briggs, 1990; Clark, 1986; Fearn-Banks, 1994, 1996; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Greenberg, 1993; Marshall, 1986; Modzelewski, 1990; Nowotny, 1989; Sklarewitz, 1991; Stanton, 1989).

Most common of all the suggestions was having a current and tested crisis communications and crisis management plan, which enables the organization to communicate with the media and its other publics (Adams, 2000; Clark, 1986; Marshall, 1986; Nowotny, 1989; Sikich, 1996; Sklarewitz, 1991; Stanton, 1989).

In addition to having a plan, most articles referred to having a strong relationship with the media to carry them through the crisis (Adams, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1994, 1996). Pepsi's public relations practitioners that handled the syringe scare advised inviting the media into the crisis, and furnishing them with facts and cooperating with them to relieve some of the attention. The media can sometimes be the organization's most beneficial ally during a crisis (Greenberg, 1993).

Tips for handling a crisis include having pertinent materials and documents ready, having a knowledgeable spokesperson to address the media, showing concern and action and instead of reacting, being pro-active (Adams, 2000; Duhe & Zoch, 1994). Even with a sound plan in place, unexpected things do occur; therefore, Mary Nowotny (1989) suggests, "the best defense is still staying on your toes"(p. 18)

Geary Sikich (1996) warns that perception is reality, which makes reputation management all the more important. During a crisis, it does not always matter what the facts are, but what the public thinks the facts are. The public may give an organization the benefit of the doubt, if that organization has a strong relationship with them. The public will be less critical if an organization partners with the community on civic issues (Crawford, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991). Developing relationships takes time and is some of the most important public relations practices that one can perform. Although this is a preventative measure, most crisis literature includes this as a step in crisis management (Crawford, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991).

Most all of the literature gave similar advice, except one in particular, which pointed out advice that none other had revealed. Fearn-Banks (1994) spoke of an earthquake case in Southern California in which no one had access to their offices, crisis plans or any other information; therefore, they were at a loss as to what to do. Besides not knowing where to begin, they also were personally devastated by the disaster. Many lost their homes and belongings.

Fearn-Banks (1994) recommends all organizations have a backup facility and a backup copy of their information in a different, safer location. By having an emergency box containing all the necessary data for a crisis, a potentially disastrous situation could be prevented or limited in nature.

Fearn-Banks (1994) also advised public relations practitioners to be prepared to be personally affected by the crisis, whether directly as in the earthquake case or indirectly. Fearn-Banks wrote about a public relations practitioner who was personally affected by an earthquake, which made the situation tougher for her to deal with. The trauma made it difficult for everyone to remember pertinent facts and crisis procedures. She was banned from her office because of safety concerns, and her home was a wreck. She was literally living out of her vehicle.

### **Case Studies**

Although Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol case became a classic example of public relations excellence, Johnson & Johnson had no formal crisis management or communications plan. It just followed the company mission, guided by the CEO (Fearn-Banks, 1996). "Every public relations decision was based on sound, socially responsible business principles, which is when public relations is most effective" (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p. 26).

After several deaths attributed to Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson withdrew its product from retail shelves across the country and openly communicated with the press regarding the issue.

Furthermore, Johnson & Johnson researched ways to prevent the crisis from occurring again by inventing the tamper resistant packaging. The company then communicated its solution to the media, thereby reassuring the public of its commitment to quality, safety and customer satisfaction (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Lessons learned from the Tylenol cyanide poisonings extended beyond the organization's borders. Other pharmaceutical companies heeded the warnings and took action, copying Johnson & Johnson's tamper resistant packaging. Some people felt the crisis would be the end of Tylenol, but Johnson & Johnson executives were forthright with full disclosure to the public and media. This action kept the organization's image and the public's trust of the company intact (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Harris, 1998).

Exxon, however, seemed to do everything wrong regarding the Valdez oil spill (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1996). There were obstacles that hampered Exxon's handling of the situation including the numerous sources for the story and the remoteness of the town. The terrain was difficult to navigate and communication capabilities were low. Yet the main reason Exxon emerged in such a negative light was because the CEO, Lawrence G. Rawl, refused to travel to Alaska to show his concern. He also refused to issue an apology and showed little emotion or concern over the disaster. Rawl's handling of the situation provoked demonstrations against Exxon and the loss of customers. Exxon has retained its financial strength, but has never recovered its image (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Most CEOs now know from the Exxon case they must be present in a time of crisis to demonstrate the sincerity of the organization, to deal with the media and to show compassion (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Corporations similar in nature to Exxon learned how powerful environmental groups can be in the court of public opinion; therefore, public relations excellency needs to be practiced before a crisis. In addition, other oil companies paid attention to this warning sign (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

## **Crisis Management Models**

For this thesis, several crisis management models were studied for suitability to the topic.

### **Grunig and Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations**

J. Grunig and T. Hunt classify types of public relations performed by organizations and individuals. Most organizations primarily practice one of the four models, but at times add one of the other three to the mix (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997).

Model 1 is referred to as the Press Agency/Publicity Model. In this model, any publicity is good, whether the information is negative, positive, true or false. The main purpose is to get the product or organization's name out to the publics. Information is transferred one-way, meaning from the public relations practitioner to the audience, and does not allow for feedback from the audience. Research is not used in Model 1 (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997).

Model 2 is referred to as the Public Information Model. This model also involves the one-way transfer of information as in Model 1. Model 2, however, allows for a little research and some evaluation of the program. Model 2 also requires truth in its reporting of information done mainly in a journalistic style. Organizations that primarily produce press releases participate in this model (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997).

Model 3 is referred to as the Two-Way Asymmetrical Model. This model, also called the scientific persuasion model, uses social science theory and research to persuade audiences to accept the organization's point of view. The feedback involved in this model is usually done through



surveys and polls in which organizations find out what the audience thinks or feels about the organization and then uses that information to push its agenda. The organization rules in this model (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997).

Model 4 is referred to as the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. This model is sometimes called the mutual understanding model, and is the basis of excellent public relations programs. The goal of this model is to achieve dialogue. Research is used in communication with the audience. The organization uses feedback from the audience in its decision-making, ultimately giving the audience power within the organization (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997).

According to Grunig and Hunt, organizations that execute Model 4 are considered to be practicing excellent public relations (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1991; Spicer, 1997). Public relations practitioners that primarily practice models one or two are called practitioners of craft public relations, while those that practice models three and four are called public relations professionals (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Spicer, 1997). The public relations professionals see their role as “having a strategic purpose for an organization: to manage conflict and build relationships with strategic publics that limit the autonomy of the organization” (Spicer, 1997, p. 65). The practitioners of craft public relations see their role as getting the information out to the appropriate media, strictly a communications role (Cameron, Mitrook & Estes, 1996; Spicer, 1997).

### **Marra’s Model of Public Relations Excellency**

In F. J. Marra’s doctoral dissertation written in 1992, he identifies strategies, techniques and characteristics common to excellent responses to crises creating a model of excellent crisis public relations. Although this model incorporates Grunig and Hunt’s four models of public relations, it

takes the question of public relations excellency further. Marra's model specifically outlines what organizations need to have in place both before and after a crisis occurs (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Organizations that have strong, well-developed relationships with their publics before a crisis will suffer fewer negative consequences from the situation, than organizations that do not have strong, well-developed relationships (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Organizations that practice Models 1, 2, or 3 of Grunig's models will have weak pre-crisis relationships. Organizations that practice two-way symmetrical crisis communications, or Model 4, will have stronger relationships better able to withstand a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

Organizations that prepare for crises and continually update their plans and use two-way symmetrical crisis public relations practices will have stronger relationships with their publics, thereby having less damage when a crisis does occur (Fearn-Banks, 1996).

### **Ramee's Crisis Management Model**

John Ramee's crisis management model, published in 1987, breaks the process down into three categories. First, there is preparation, then management and finally review. Within each of these categories are steps to achieve the desired outcome (Brewton, 1987).

During the preparation phase, a public relations practitioner should look for warning signs, watch industry competitors, consider contingencies and select a crisis team. Warning signs can include things within the organization like customer complaints, employee grievances, government regulations or anything out of the ordinary. Watching industry competitors for warning signs or crises is important during this phase. If a crisis occurs in a competitor, then the organization should take notice and prepare to prevent such an occurrence within its organization. Considering the

contingencies is brainstorming sessions where everything that can go wrong is thought of and planned for. Finally, a team is selected to implement the crisis plan when the need arises (Brewton, 1987).

The second phase, crisis management, begins as soon as a crisis is noticed. Establishing open, two-way symmetrical communications with various publics including the media should be the top priority. When dealing with the media, an official spokesperson should be designated and all presentations should be professional, with accurate and timely information. Decision-making is also a top priority in the crisis management category. Decisions must be made quickly without time for research or much forethought. Ramee advises practitioners to avoid the impulse to act immediately, have one single decision making authority and act when necessary. Ramee says to gather as much information as possible before making a decision and have one person or one group be the decision maker clearing all the information or decisions through him (Brewton, 1987).

The third and final phase, post-crisis review, involves investigating what happened throughout the crisis from the onset to the end. The purpose of the investigation is not to be a witch-hunt or to find a scapegoat, says Ramee, but to find out how the crisis occurred and what could have been done to prevent such an incident. In addition, the post-crisis review phase involves facilitating the recovery process. Strategies and plans are created in order to bring the organization back to its pre-crisis state (Brewton, 1987).

### **Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt Crisis Management Model**

The model proposes four phases to a crisis as well as proposing a crisis life cycle similar to a biological life cycle. The crisis life cycle passes through the same sequence as a biological life cycle: birth, growth, maturity and death. With proper intervention or management, crises can be aborted, never grow to maturity or anything in between (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

Three principles guide the model: issues management, planning-prevention, and implementation. These principles are the underlying actions required for the model to be effective. There are also two assumptions regarding the model: “every crisis has a life cycle, which can be influenced, and the best way to avoid negative media coverage—or its recurrence—is to engage in reputation-enhancing, socially responsible activities” (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995, p.25).

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) also state that research plays a vital role in every phase of the crisis management model. The organization should conduct research to determine its publics’ attitudes towards issues or situations. With this knowledge, the organization can better devise a course of action.

#### Phase One: Issues Management

This phase involves scanning the environment for public trends or for crises affecting competitors, which may in turn affect the organization. In addition, it involves collecting and analyzing data so that a concentrated effort at preventing or redirecting a crisis can take place. The organization identifies any potential issue or crisis and aims to deter its onset (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

#### Phase Two: Planning-Prevention

During this phase, the organization recognizes that a crisis is about to take place or that an issue might change quickly with intensity. The recognized situation has gone beyond issues management. This phase is when the crisis can actually begin, thus a proactive policy needs to be set into motion. This phase is the beginning of a crisis that takes an organization by surprise (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

Several other steps need to be taken also, such as reanalyzing the organization’s relationships with its stakeholders, preparing a contingency plan, designating members to a crisis-

management team, identifying the company spokesperson and determining the message, target and media outlets needed to implement the plan (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995). In addition, management needs to assess the “dimensions of the problem, degree of control the organization has over the situation, and the options the company can choose from in developing a specific crisis plan” (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995, p. 28).

#### Phase Three: The Crisis

The third phase involves the company’s response to the crisis. The organization attempts to prevent negative publicity, while communicating corrective actions the organization is taking to handle the situation. In addition, company messages should be directed at affected stakeholders, third-party support from an expert should be obtained and an internal communications plan should be implemented (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

#### Phase Four: The Post-Crisis

There is still much work to be done following a crisis. The organization needs to monitor its multiple publics and the issue until the crisis has subsided completely. In addition, the organization needs to continue to inform the media of the status of the situation. Finally, the organization needs to evaluate the crisis plan’s effectiveness, incorporating feedback to improve it for future crises while also developing a communications strategy to undo the damage caused by the crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) agreed that if organizations were to manage crises effectively, and implement the issues management and planning-prevention phases, then organizations would not need to have crisis plans. Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt believe that public relations practitioners should practice reputation management as a type of preventative public relations, so that a crisis will be minimized when it does occur. The two actually feel that to

practice crisis management, organizations should be practicing reputation management on a continuous basis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

After considering each model, the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model was chosen to use in comparison against the interview findings. This model compares a crisis to a life cycle, where a crisis is born, grows to maturity and dies. In addition, this model includes all phases of a crisis, as well as addressing topics such as issues management, research and reputation management.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the literature review for this thesis and the crisis management model chosen, three research questions are posed.

- How do sports organizations handle crises?
- What is an effective technique when dealing with a crisis?
- What is the most effective part of the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model?

Determining the most effective technique to use during a sports crisis and the most effective part in the crisis management model seems to be the most pertinent information to gather. The findings of this thesis will assist many professionals in their careers in the handling of crises and relationships with publics. In addition, this thesis will introduce a topic less studied by academia, which should initiate further interest and research.

These questions will be answered by interviewing nine sports public relations practitioners on how they would handle a crisis at their organizations. In addition, the findings will then be compared to the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is the best approach to this thesis, because it begins with the intention of exploring and interpreting a particular subject by identifying themes in data (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997; Thompson, 1999; Weiner et al., 2001). In addition, qualitative research seeks meaning and understanding (Law et al., 1998) by asking “what,” “how” and “why” questions as well as being problem-oriented (Cook, Meade & Perry, 2001; Harding & Gantley, 1998; Lacey & Luff, 2001).

Qualitative research’s strength lies in validity, its closeness to the truth (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). Good qualitative research goes beyond skimming the surface of a subject or summing up narratives along thematic lines; it interprets data to develop theoretical insights to describe or explain organizations or experiences (Cook, Meade & Perry, 2001; Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). A common complaint with qualitative research is that the findings cannot be generalized to the rest of the field; however, in this case valuable lessons regarding the handling of a crisis are certainly educational tools (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997).

There are several different methods of collecting qualitative data. Field observations, document analysis, interviews and focus groups (Cook, Meade & Perry, 2001; Harding & Gantley, 1998; Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997; Thompson, 1999) are all methods that yield deeper information on how individuals think, feel and act, which is “rich in human insights and easy to understand” (Heath, 1995, p. 80). People, who have experienced the situation, key informants, are the best sources for data (Law et al., 1998). Unlike the use of random people or samples in quantitative research, qualitative research requires the use of subjects and subject matter close to the issue in order to gain valuable insight (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997; Lacey & Luff, 2001).

Interviews are a window into the key informant’s world capturing the essence of their day-to-day experiences, (Goulding, 2002; Law et al., 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). An interview

guide is the most common method for qualitative interviewing, whereby the subject's point of view and experiences are revealed (Kvale, 1996). Open-ended questions are asked in order to gather as much data in as short amount of time as possible (Law et al., 1998). A limitation with using interviews to gather data is that framing could occur since the researcher asks the questions and provides the quotes in the findings (Law et al., 1998). The researcher decides on what questions will be asked and what quotes to use, thereby possibly using the data to skew the findings in a way suitable to the researcher. There are, however, advantages of interviews. Interviews are inexpensive, quickly done and provide an in-depth look into a topic (Law et al., 1998). Interviews should be conducted until saturation occurs, which is when the data becomes redundant (Goulding, 2002; Lacey & Luff, 2001; Law et al., 1998).

Data should be analyzed line-by-line to identify recurring themes, categories, patterns or common elements (Goulding, 2002; Lacey & Luff, 2001; Law et al., 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Qualitative research using an interview guide as the collection method seems best suited to this thesis since both of these methods are applicable when little is known about the subject and in-depth knowledge is required by key informants.

This study will therefore consist of interviewing nine sports public relations practitioners with eight open-ended questions geared towards the organizations' crisis management practices. The questions are based on the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model, which was chosen for comparison with the data. The questions below were generated from each phase in the model, including issues management, planning-prevention, the crisis and post-crisis. In addition pertinent points such as research and reputation management were include.



The first two questions, defining a crisis and the organization's use of issues management, is derived from phase one of the crisis management model. The next two questions regarding prevention and planning are derived from phase two of the crisis management model. The question regarding what an organization does during a crisis is derived from phase three, and the last phase, post-crisis, has a question which addresses what an organization does after a crisis has passed. The remaining two questions about research and reputation management are each based on pertinent issues regarding the crisis management model.

**Interview Guide:**

1. Define a crisis for your organization.
2. How does your organization use issues management in its public relations?
3. What types of things does your organization do to prevent a crisis?
4. How does your organization plan for a crisis?
5. During a crisis, what does your organization do?
6. Once the crisis has passed, what does your organization do?
7. How does your organization use research in its public relations?
8. How does your organization use reputation management in its public relations?

The participants were identified through Web site information, contacted by e-mail with a letter and followed up by phone, where upon an interview date and time were set. The participants were chosen based on their knowledge of sports public relations, accessibility to the researcher and agreement to participate. In addition, a mix of "small" and "large" sports organizations was chosen. The size of the organization was based on their Division I standing, "small" being Division I-AA and "large" being Division I-A.

**Organizations Interviewed:**

1. Louisiana State University Athletic Department-Division I-A
2. Louisiana Tech University Athletic Department-Division I-A
3. McNeese State University Athletic Department-Division I-AA
4. Nicholls State University Athletic Department-Division I-AA
5. Northwestern State University Athletic Department-Division I-AA
6. Southeastern Louisiana University Athletic Department-Division I-AA
7. Southern University Athletic Department-Division I-AA
8. University of Louisiana at Lafayette Athletic Department-Division I-A
9. University of Louisiana at Monroe Athletic Department-Division I-A

The interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, not exceeding an hour. The interviews, either in person or via phone, were tape recorded for a verbatim transcript to be used as the data for the thesis. All participants signed a consent form informing them of their right to privacy.

Interviewing of key informants continued until saturation of data was reached, whereby the answers to the questions were redundant.

Once saturation had been reached, the audiotapes were then transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy.

Line-by-line analysis of the data began by identifying recurring themes, answers, ideas or suggestions to the research questions, in addition, looking for commonalities and differences in answers, and then extracting them for preliminary categories. Further processing of the collected data was done by deducing the categories to as few as possible, whereby they could be compared to the crisis management model chosen for the research. Once the themes were compared to the crisis management model, the findings were reported and conclusions drawn.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Nine full-time sports public relations practitioners with sports organizations were interviewed using an interview guide consisting of eight questions generated from the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model. The results are described below following the format of the model for ease of reading and comprehension. The results of the interviews are summarized for each phase of the model with italicized quotes from the transcribed interviews below each summary to validate the findings.

Each of the four phases discussed below has a research section within it. The reason for such inclusion is based on Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt's (1995) crisis management model, which cites that research is a vital part of all four phases of the model. Besides scanning the environment for issues, research regarding an organization's publics and their attitudes should be acquired in order to decide on appropriate plans of action.

### **Phase One: Issues Management**

This phase involves scanning the environment for public trends or for crises affecting competitors, who may in turn affect the organization; therefore, defining a crisis is important. In addition, this phase involves research, the collecting and analyzing of data, so that a concentrated effort at preventing or redirecting a crisis from occurring can take place (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

#### **Defining a Crisis**

In defining a crisis, many organizations used examples of what a crisis might be for them. Some crises mentioned were deliveries of concession stand products not showing up, moving RV parking which angered fans, loss of financial support for programs, NCAA investigations/violations, criminal charges against players and deaths of a player or a coach. Some

interviewees gave definitions of a crisis that seemed to be straight from a textbook, while others seemed not to be able to define a crisis, but only give examples.

Well, I don't know that there's an actual definition, because I mean, crises are different for different folks, and some people view things differently. Probably in the most common sense of the word, you're thinking, there's someone been arrested for a crime. That is gonna shed a negative light on ...the athletic department.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

Something out of the norm. Being put in a situation that is unfamiliar.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

I would define a crisis as any act or event that is unexpected and shed a negative light on the university.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Anything that would potentially bring embarrassment or bad news or that involves something bad that would happen to one of our athletes or one of our employees.--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

A crisis can be anything out of our normal daily operations in athletics. It would be anything dealing with any of the athletes, whether it'd be criminal, academic, anything that could affect the public image of the institution.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

I think it is any situation in which the news is alarming and the outcome is uncertain and, and/or the outcome is uncertain.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

So, pretty much a crisis for us is anything that's not positive, whether that means a student athlete getting arrested, whether that means a coach getting in trouble, anything obviously dealing with the law would be a crisis. Any kind of negative news at all, we consider a crisis.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Anything that takes away from...or deters...or distracts our order of business...I think would qualify as a crisis.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

## **Research Regarding Issues Management**

Issues management employs a research technique called scanning the environment whereby a public relations practitioner searches and gathers pertinent information regarding their organization, and then the information is used in management decisions.

The actual management part is when the organization implements a course of action based on the information gathered about that issue. Since the research is done before the management decision can be implemented, the research section precedes the management section.

All of the organizations interviewed used forms of research, whether they were formal or informal or both, regarding issues management, which agrees with the crisis management model. Types of formal research were surveys and focus groups, while informal research was networking with peers and reading news from a variety of sources.

About issues management, every organization interviewed uses networking as an informal research tool. All of the interviewees keep abreast of current issues and trends regarding their industry through constant networking with others in their field, either in meetings, by e-mail or through the Internet Web sites that most organizations now have. One organization e-mails questions it has to every Division I team around the country, 117 organizations in all. The organization also, in return, receives questions from those organizations. Another organization performs research via their Web site and e-mail, and has even recently employed an outside research firm for a more technical matter.

Several sports information directors cited ongoing issues where the organization is not only scanning the environment for information, but also using formal research such as surveys and focus groups to gather information before making decisions.

Many also mentioned reading literature produced by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and information in general from newspapers and other news sources. Only one interviewee cited the use of research with statistics and reference books.

Research? I would say we use informal research quite often, calling other schools that have either gone through specific incidences that we're going through or who we have good relationships with for advice. I think that would be the closest research thing that we would do.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Research? I don't know how much research we use. Obviously, we use other examples of what goes on nationwide. I don't know if that is really research, but we're using those incidents to try to make sure that our people understand what can happen if you don't do what you're supposed to [do].--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Hmmm. That's a good question. You know, one thing that I just do, I just really try to keep up with what's going on in society.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We share, whether it's good or bad. Whether it is a great idea about how they're doing the fund-raising at another school. We just all keep our eye out for that and pass it along. And, you know, or to just file away if it's how they handled a bad situation. So I guess just to answer it, mainly networking. We all do research, whether it's...informal, if we have a question or we have a problem. For instance, I have on my e-mail...all the SIDs [Sports Information Directors]...[at] Division I schools in America that I can send an e-mail to. One button. Asking people around the country what they are doing. We are about to put together some type of group...to discuss our mascot, which is Indians. Not changing it, but to make sure that we treat the mascot in the proper manner. I don't know if you know that in the NCAA and nationally right now, there's a big push to get rid of the Indian mascots. And, we've put together some surveys with the assistance of a couple of our marketing classes. We're trying to better market our athletic department, particularly to students. What kind of things interested our students? What would make them come to ballgames? What kind of things they didn't like about it? What kind of things they like about athletes and the media that covers us?--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

I think research is ongoing and constant. We do work very hard in talking with professionals in the PR/media relations field to be sure that we're doing some of the things that are being done across the industry. We talk to various

constituencies to pre-assess how our messages and methodology for getting that message out, how effective it will be.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

There are a lot of organizations that we're involved in, be it ACTA [American Council of Trustee & Alumni], NACMA [National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators] and CoSIDA [College Sports Information Directors of America], these are all just acronyms for different college athletic organizations for marketing, public relations folks, sports information directors and athletic administrators. And, there's actually, each year there's seminars and table topics that come up, they're discussed and folks share ideas. And there's the NCAA news where ideas are shared. Everybody basically looks at everybody. We did employ an outside agency when we were thinking about restarting football to do sort of a survey of the local population and regional area to see if there would be that interest there.-Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

I think everyday really is ongoing research. But we also have groups, for instance, we have a group of public relations [practitioners] in [our] conference and as part of our yearly meetings, we talk a lot about logistical things that we do on a day-to-day basis.... kind of brainstorming periods. We compare notes. Are you familiar with the ticket plan? That was a brewing crisis...we knew it would be a negative fallout from that. We did conduct focus groups. We asked their reactions to various ticket prices. We asked...what information did they already know about athletics. How much did they know about our financial situation? What are their impressions about how much money we have and how much money we need. That was a crisis we could anticipate.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

## **Issues Management**

Issues management employs a research technique called scanning the environment whereby a public relations practitioner searches and gathers pertinent information regarding their organization, and then the information is used in management decisions to prevent or curb a crisis.

When asked how their organization uses issues management, most needed the term defined for them, but once defined, they could give examples of what they do regarding issues management. The definition in the preceding paragraph or examples of current issues was given.

In addition to using research regarding issues management, the organizations also implemented action based on their research, if the situation warranted it. This course of action is also in alignment with the crisis management model.

The majority of the interviewees said they meet with their staff and athletes to discuss issues and trends making sure that everyone is aware of national or local situations. If they feel that, something needs to be implemented to prevent the same issue from occurring on their campus then they do so. One organization has a round table brainstorming session where they discuss how it might affect them, and if anything should be done regarding their program. Another interviewee spoke of the constant self-assessment his program is under, especially when an issue can be localized.

We make everyone aware of the issue the other university had so that we can be on alert to see either the warning signs of the issue or to try to curb our manner to prevent such an issue.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Once you see those types of things, then you look in the mirror. Take a look at your organization and see if you may have those same problems, and if they may need to be addressed.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

I think we do seize the opportunity to localize national issues in the media and to let people know that we are addressing those issues. I think it's a constant assessment process. I'm reasonably confident that if there was something rotten in Denmark, we would know about it. Is there any constant assessment of what we're doing in light of the responsibility we have to the student athletes, to the staff people, to the student body, to the alumni, to the community? Yes.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

Paying attention to what's going on in the world...to see what's current, what's new [and what's] out there that we may have to face in some way, shape or form. Scale it down to where it fits our situation. Where we can discuss it in maybe a staff meeting, where it goes up the ladder from a staff meeting to...a president's council meeting.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We kind of bring out all the national issues. We go through it like a round table. Have you heard anything that is going on in your sport? Has anybody



heard anything with this sport? Do you hear anything from athletes? Let's try to prevent this from happening. Well, why do you think that happened? We go through and talk about it.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

You're constantly learning from everybody else's successes and their failures.... then we will try to implement it. If we see something happen, as I mentioned, at another university on the negative end of things, then we'll try to make sure that does not happen at this university.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We're not making decisions in a vacuum. We're taking issues that happen at other places in our market place, which is college athletics, and applying it to what we do.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

## **Phase Two: Planning-Prevention**

During this phase, the organization recognizes that a crisis is impending or that an issue might intensify. This phase is when the crisis can actually begin, thus a proactive policy needs to be set into motion (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

Several other steps need to be taken also: reanalyzing the organization's relationships with its stakeholders, preparing a contingency plan, designating members to a crisis-management team, identifying the company spokesperson and determining the message, target and media outlets needed to implement the plan (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

In addition, management needs to assess the "dimensions of the problem, degree of control the organization has over the situation, and the options the company can choose from in developing a specific crisis plan" (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

### **Planning for a Crisis**

Whether an organization has a written plan or one in their mind or no plan at all, the results of the interviews varied greatly. A couple of organizations do not have written plans, and do not feel that planning for a crisis can be done. Some said their organization might have a written plan, maybe in the Athletic Director's office. They did not really know for sure. Other organizations

mentioned having a plan or several plans for different situations, while another even mentioned having a legal and crisis management team in place for when a crisis arises.

All of those with plans are in alignment with the crisis management model, while the two organizations without plans are not. Although most organizations agreed, it was hard to plan for a crisis, if not impossible, since no one knows what the crisis will be; most agreed there are certain things that could be done for any crisis. These “generic” ideas that fit with any crisis are in alignment with the crisis management model.

#### Organizations without Plans

Well, I’m not sure that you can honestly plan for one. You can try to prevent one from happening.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

No. It’s just, for our office and as far as me personally. I try to go through the same routine daily. To try to go through and try to prepare ahead of time. I don’t think that you can actually...prepare. Because, you can prepare as much as you want for a game or for a situation, but things that happen out of the norm are just going to happen sometimes. I don’t think you have control over that.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We have an ongoing dialogue between my office, our director of athletics, our vice-president for external affairs and an accessibility to the president. We stay in constant contact when we do have crisis situations develop.-- Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

#### Organizations with Plans

We do [have a written plan]. Those are kept in the athletic director’s office, but, once again, I’m just the go between. I’m just the mouthpiece.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

No [written plan]. We’ve got pretty much, at least I do, an idea in my mind the way I would handle each one. With regards to things we can’t control, we just try to be prepared as a staff, that we can be pretty much be mobilized at any time to try to handle a crisis. We work hand-in-hand with the university administration and the public information office.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

Well, I don’t know that you ever plan for a crisis. You have at least some type of model in place to deal with it. I wish we planned better. I was

involved in public affairs department at the university. I wrote a crisis management plan for our public affairs department. I use a lot of those ideas when we come to a crisis--Assistant Athletic Director  
Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We do have a written policy in place for [evacuation of the stadium], and our compliance department has a written plan for how they address NCAA rules. You can't plan for everything. There are those crises that you just have to react to and handle the best way that you can. You can't plan for the death of an athlete. You can't plan for the death of a coach. Those you just gotta handle with the best class and dignity that you can.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

We have a legal team [and] a crisis management team. And, when we have a problem, and it's a very serious nature, we consult [them].--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

### **Prevention of a Crisis**

Proper issues management prevents or minimizes crises, according to the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model. In addition to issues management as a prevention technique, a couple of themes regarding crisis prevention were deduced from the interviews. The use of education and communication were the two most prevalently mentioned. The remainder of the prevention tips included family ties, employee hiring and daily routines.

All the organizations interviewed had ideas on how they could prevent situations that routinely occur within their industry. With a combination of issues management, education and communication, most have the prevention phase well covered.

### **Education**

Besides using issues management for the prevention of a crisis, some organizations mentioned educational programs regarding life skills and choices, which they implement in order to prevent situations that routinely occur in their organization. Usually the crisis involves criminal

charges, such as destruction of property, drug abuse, rapes, sexual assaults and domestic violence.

Besides having guest speakers, many receive educational videos from the NCAA organization concerning industry issues.

Probably the biggest thing is in monitoring and keeping track of your athletes in as many ways as you can, as far as what they're doing in class and make sure they're doing well academically. You also try to put them in best situations to be successful socially, try to get across to them the potential trouble areas. How they can get into trouble; just pass along that experience. You know, teach them as best they can how to make good decisions.--  
Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-  
Division I-A

We invite [Student Affairs] several times throughout the year to come and speak to our athletes, you know? It's just a known fact; crime goes up on campuses near ends of semesters. We talk about things that are just out there period in today's society when it comes to dealing with athletes, whether it is the violence issue, whether it's domestic violence issue, whether its rape, sexual assaults, drugs, whatever. We preach to them...causes and consequences. You're representing more than yourself when you're out in the community, so conduct yourself well. [This] university now has become your extended family. It's to try to teach our kids some life skills, you know? We want our kids to be successful people in society when they leave our campus.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

You can try to prevent one from happening. We try to educate all of our student athletes...on what they can and cannot do. We reiterate the fact that, just because they are a scholarship student athlete doesn't mean they can get away with anything else that the normal person cannot get away with. Go over the student handbook, that has not only obviously information in there on laws statewide or citywide, but it also [has] university laws.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We do some preventative things. Like last night we had a program through the university for our student athletes and coaches and staff that basically was a sexual abuse type seminar, which showed warning signs and how you could react, provided counseling if anyone needed it. We have a student athlete advisory committee that we employ which helps to pass along information like that to our student athletes. And the NCAA produces a lot of things on their own from instructional videos, educational videos to just hard copy publications, which helps deal with topics of interest or things that may need to be addressed at some point in time. So, there's a lot of different ways that at least in the athletic department that we try to avoid anything beforehand.--  
Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

## Communication

Communication, whether it was internal, external or both, was another means of prevention for some organizations. Some feel that if the lines of internal communication are open and far reaching within the organization, then a crisis can be prevented or less in severity. Others cited the use of open external communications with the media to prevent or lessen the severity of a crisis.

### Internal Communications

I think the day-to-day management of any enterprises would definitely include any and all efforts to avoid crisis situations. Now there are situations that develop that we monitor and hopefully can exert some control over and, again, it all comes back to very effective communication between the decision makers and the message shapers. And if we can continue that very effective and thorough communications channels, then we got a great opportunity to minimize the damage from most crisis situations.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

### External Communications

You know just about every decision we make here the consideration is given, what is the public reaction going to be? Because the public can create a crisis by reacting negatively to something that we do here. It seems like every little move we make here, we live in a fish bowl; and we know that and every little move we make can stir up a, a minor crisis.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

Any press release that we release out, it has to be looked at, at least twice by people to make sure that we don't release inaccurate information. We never release anything without [the athletic director] looking at it.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We try to put a positive spin on it, but sometimes you can't. Best thing you can do is just tell the truth and let it go.--Senior Associate Athletic Director-Division I-AA

### Internal and External Communications

I would say proper communication between the public relations arm of the university...the sports information arm in athletics...and the athletic director and all the coaches. As well as truth and honesty with the media, because the

biggest thing is if you try to hide something or lie about it, the media is going to find out the truth and it's going to become a major problem.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

### Family Ties

Three organizations mentioned having a sense of family with their student athletes, which helps to prevent crises. All three claim the small size of their organization and the community in which the organization is located allow for a closeness that keeps a situation from occurring or from getting out of hand.

This type of prevention, between the organization and one of its internal publics, could be classified under the internal communications section, however, the connection between these two groups is more than just communications; it is a serious relationship, therefore, deserving of its own category.

We're fortunate in that we're in a small town. We're on a small campus. There are very personal relationships between our department people and, indeed strong relationships between our department staff and coaches and the student athletes.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We try to stay as close knit as you can, as a family is what we like to say. Just to say, hey let's do this. Let's try to prevent this from happening. It's a small community.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

The biggest thing we try to do from our standpoint is preach this family kind of ties, you know? You wouldn't want to embarrass your family in a bad situation. [X] University now has become your extended family. Don't put your extended family in that same predicament.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

### Employees

A couple of organizations mentioned having the right people in place to prevent a crisis. These people are there to perform duties, but should also be loyal to the organization, and be aware of issues that might affect that organization.

How do you prevent something like that from happening? You got to hire the best people that you can and hopefully they're people who are loyal to you and loyal to the school. You hope that you hire strong enough people.-- Senior Associate Athletic Director-Division I-AA

We have medical trainers in place that deal with keeping our athletes healthy and our coaches healthy. We have a compliance department in place to make sure we abide by the rules.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

### Daily Routine

One interviewee mentioned following a daily routine, and checking on things and employees to ensure all things run smoothly.

I try to do, go through the same routine daily. To try to...prepare ahead of time as far as...game management. Make sure people are going to show up to work. Make sure people are there. Make sure we have crowd control. Make sure you call ahead. Make sure, you know, to try to prevent situations.-- Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

### **Research Regarding Planning-Prevention**

A few organizations conduct research in order to gain knowledge regarding their publics. The broad data collected is used to implement customer satisfaction and to possibly avert a crisis.

We have done surveys. We've done phone polls. We keep it current and when we do research like that, we try to make it pretty broad based so that we can find out a lot of information. We'll ask them what are their impressions of parking? Where do they park? Where are they driving from? Traffic flow? What kind of food do they like? Where do they sit in the stadium? How old they are? Do they use all their tickets? Do they pass them to other people? We ask them a battery of questions so that we can use that information in various functions.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

We've put together some surveys with the assistance of a couple of our marketing classes. We're trying to better market our athletic department, particularly to students. What kind of things interested our students? What would make them come to ballgames? What kind of things they didn't like about it? What kind of things they like about athletes and the media that covers us?--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Via the Web site or e-mail, we send out ...questionnaires to different areas and find out basically what people want. What do you want to sell at football games, be it merchandise or concessions?--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

### **Phase Three: The Crisis**

The third phase involves the company's response to the crisis. The organization attempts to prevent negative publicity, while communicating corrective actions the organization is taking to handle the situation. In addition, company messages should be directed at affected stakeholders, third-party support from an expert should be obtained and an internal communications plan should be implemented (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

#### **During the Crisis**

Most organizations gave similar answers when asked how their organization responds to a crisis. Some of their answers fit the model perfectly, for example, immediately meeting to discuss the plan of action, stopping negative publicity by coming out with as much of the truth as possible as early as possible and acquiring third-party support from an expert. While some organizations acquired third-party support, other organizations lacked this aspect. Some of the organizations interviewed did not have the staff support or the financial support to handle a crisis appropriately.

Everyone agreed that telling the truth was the most important aspect during a crisis, but not everyone agreed when the truth telling should occur. One organization tries to keep things from getting out to the media by first handling the situation internally. Of course, if the situation cannot be handled that way, then they agreed to be forthright and honest with the media. Again, this response doesn't fit within the crisis model, which calls for the organization to halt negative publicity and to communicate to the organization's publics the situation and its handling.

Eight of the organizations interviewed agreed that their organization was to release any news to the media as soon as possible. They felt by doing so the media and their publics would trust them



more when it came to future situations. In addition to that, trust, a few organizations said that the truth would come out anyway, and then the organization would have a bigger or longer extended crisis. The organization would then have to explain why it withheld information, which some people consider lying or telling half-truths.

The “truth” aspect fits the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model, but more importantly, the telling of the truth right away fits the model even better in regards to reputation management, which will be discussed later on in the findings section.

Most organizations mentioned calling a meeting of appropriate people as their first response to a crisis. Besides getting everyone together to let them know what has occurred and to discuss the situation, the meeting is more importantly called to make sure everyone in the organization is going to send the same message; that everyone is on the same page. This response, planning and implementing internal communications, does fit the crisis management model.

Only one interviewee said he really did not know what he would do during a crisis, because it just depended on the situation. He had handled a crisis before when an athlete committed suicide, and he knew what he would do in that situation; yet, every situation is different and requires different actions. Obviously, this response does not fit within the crisis model, which calls for an organization to have some type of plan of action.

Well, standard things that we do are establish a limited number of spokespeople, if in fact there's a need for spokespeople.... But, basically the premises of it were to have one central spokesperson, to have all other people accessible to the media, have them all telling the same story, speaking the same message, acknowledging that things went on that should not have gone one, recognizing that sanctions had to be issued, pointing out the corrective measures, many correctives measures had been taken by the university already, and looking forward to the future knowing that many of those corrective measures had already enhanced our...program. We stay in constant contact when we do have crisis situations develop. We discuss and

consider, use e-mail to circulate drafts of press releases, etc. to be sure that the message we are sending out is uniform, is forthright, and addresses all the necessary issues.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

I think, make sure that your department has one message, one clear and concise message. And whether that comes from one person or five people, as long as that message is consistent from everyone, that's the important thing to do. We all get together quickly, and say, OK. What are we going to say and what are we going to do? And, so it's important to [have] internal communications, number one, is the first thing, so that your external communication is consistent. And, that would be if you don't already have something in place...in this case, we have something in place, we go to that book. And when we go to that book, we already know what's gonna take place. So, it depends on; that's the strange thing about crises, is you always hear that you should have a crisis plan in place, but you don't, you never know what the crisis is going to be and every crisis dictates different situations and different ways to react. So, the important thing is to have clear headed people and who are flexible and... don't panic, and make clear decisions quickly. You have to have good decision makers. So, there's a people factor in all this that's hard to put on paper. You can put anything you want on paper, but if you don't have the right people to put that plan in place, then the crisis plan won't work.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

And the way we deal with it is, first thing is, we meet and decide where it's headed. What direction to take? What I always push for is, and the way I've been taught is in a crisis the best way is to get out in front of it, find out what the truth is, tell as much of the truth to everyone as you can at the beginning. Get out in front of it and stay out in front of it, and it's not as big a crisis... and deal with what you get right then, you know? Have the worst be at the front, and it seems to be a faster cycle that way. If you're giving bits and pieces of information...then things can drag out, can go on for days and days.--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Best thing you can do is just tell the truth and let it go. Because if you start hedging on it or trying to or not tell the truth, the best way, I always thought that the best way to give out any information is to tell the truth. If we got a problem over here and we got a recruiting problem or we got somebody who was illegally recruited or whatever, the best way to do it is just, I mean when we find out we got a problem like that, is just to get it out. You don't hold anything. You get it out to everybody. And then you just take the consequences and go on from there. Lot of people like to hide all that stuff, but you can't do it because it's going to get out one-way or the other. And you might as well be truthful about it up front.--Senior Associate Athletic Director-Division I-AA

The first thing you gotta do is, we meet to make sure we are all aware. That we are all on the same page. I think that is the key thing in any crisis situation is to make sure that everyone involved in the situation is on the same page. But what you have to do is also make sure that you are sensitive. I think that is just as key as anything is making sure you are sensitive to the subject matter and to everyone involved. And, that's especially when you are dealing with deaths.... with sexual assaults. Make sure that you're protected on your end as far as liability, but also be sensitive to the fact that this is a serious issue. We're gonna let the criminal courts run its course before we make any decision. That we don't want to go out there and do something, and Lord forbid, they were false charges or whatever. I've been at other universities where something happens and a lot of times the athletic department may want to try to keep it in the athletic department. And it can be detrimental to the university. It can be detrimental strictly because if something negative comes up, when you see it in the newspaper, its always going to start out [X] university. Its not going to start out, well, the athletic director did this. It's gonna start out, you know, there's an investigation going on at [X] University. And, when you use the name... it incorporates a lot of people, with the broad strokes, you know? And a lot of times, making sure that they have their facts correct on the situation. A lot of times things happen in the community that get reported back, well, he's an athlete at school. Well, no, he may not be an athlete. He may have the same name or he could have been on the team three years ago and was dismissed or whatever. So, it's trying to make sure that all the facts [are correct].--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We immediately assemble...our compliance officer, our [legal counsel], our athletic director, the sports information director, several other key staff members to discuss it and plan on how we're going to resolve the situation. If it bears further explanation, we will call a press conference to inform the media of the crisis and how we plan to handle the crisis. To make it public knowledge before people hear about it, come to the wrong conclusions, that kind of stuff.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We really haven't had too many crises, to be honest. We're very fortunate in that regard in that the five years I've been here, we've not had many. But, we would meet with the appropriate parties and decide on a course of action.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

Well, it just all depends. You know, obviously, if it's something that we can keep internal and keep quiet, we'll handle it internally. Depending on what the crisis is depends on how we handle it. If it's something that we can't, then we obviously are very honest and open about it. We answer the questions we can. Now obviously, the names and ages, you can't obviously answer a lot of things because then you could be liable for a lawsuit or

something by the individual. So, but we try to, we try to handle it internally. We try to keep it quiet if possible. But, if not, then, you know, then we're not going to sit here and lie about it.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

To be honest with you, I don't really know. I mean, I think, like I said, it just depends on the situation as far as what you actually do. For a death, of course, you deal with press releases, the family, the players. You know, make sure they had counseling, or if they need it. Make sure, you're watching the players. I think different situations, you would do different things.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

### **Research during a Crisis**

The Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model calls for research in every phase, even during a crisis. The model says organizations should be aware of their publics' attitudes towards the organization and to the situation at all times. A few interviewees said they would not have the time or the staff to do research during a crisis.

Only one organization mentioned using research during a crisis, although probably more do, since many mentioned using informal research such as networking with peers. One sports information director said he contacted another organization that had been through the same crisis they were currently experiencing. With their advice, he feels his organization was better able to handle the crisis, and since then has developed a plan should the same crisis ever arise again.

We did a lot of research talking with other universities who had been through a situation like that, before we had to address it. We did consult and develop a plan and, hopefully, we will never have to use that plan again. We handled it, I think, extraordinarily well.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

### **Phase Four: The Post-Crisis**

There is still much work to be done following a crisis. The organization needs to monitor its various publics and the issue until the crisis has subsided completely. In addition, the organization needs to continue to inform the media of the status of the situation. Finally, the organization needs

to evaluate the crisis plan's effectiveness, incorporating feedback to improve it for future crises while also developing a communications strategy to undo the damage caused by the crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995).

### **Post-Crisis**

Most of the organizations follow similar post-crisis actions. Their responses included words like follow-up, assessment, evaluation and education. As soon as the crisis seems to have subsided, a meeting is called to discuss what happened and what could have been done differently or better. This action does align itself with the crisis management model, which recommends learning from every situation and developing a better strategy for next time.

Continuing to inform the media of the situation and its resolution, while also planning communications directed at the organization's publics in order to undo crisis damage, is also included in this phase of the model. A few organizations mentioned doing this; therefore, they are in alignment with the crisis management model.

Besides evaluating and learning from the crisis, one public relations practitioners mentioned being prepared for the crisis to come back on the organization, that it might not be over. This is exactly what the crisis management model says should be done. A crisis may seem to be over, but the organization needs to monitor the situation and its publics until there is no chance of its return. These organizations are again following the crisis management model.

We always follow-up to tell [the media] how it was handled, the results of the investigation and findings. And, you know, if it's satisfactory to our nature, it ends there.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Immediately sit down and do a media assessment on how the situation was handled. Can't get better if you don't know what you did wrong in the first place. There's always ways to improve. Sometimes, you know, our smaller universities, we are in the reaction type of organization instead of pro-action. When you are pro-active it keeps a lot of questions off of you, and it also clears up, it really keeps people from insinuating that you're trying to hide

something. I really think that is huge in athletics, because it's always, whenever there's problems, it always looks like people are trying to hide things.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

We assess as an administrative group, again, how we handled it, how our handling of the situation was perceived by the various groups impacted by the event. Did we serve those groups correctly? Did we serve our own interests correctly? And, what can we do better next time and what do we need not to do next time?--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

I know for a fact a follow-up to make sure that that doesn't happen again. You know, kind of see what happened for whatever reason it happened. Say OK, this is what happened. Could we have prevented that from happening? And look back. We always have a meeting. Maybe put in some guidelines...to make sure that whatever it was didn't happen again in the future.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

Well, once a crisis has passed, we just try to, you know, move on and, you know, we try to learn from it. We try to educate our other employees, our other student athletes from it as well. Make sure it does not happen again.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

I think we reflect on, on how we handled the situation. If we handled it well. If we could have done things differently, so the next time it comes up, or if a similar situation comes up. So, there's as much communication that takes place afterwards as, if you do it right, as there is before. So there needs to be a continuing...there needs to be an evaluation period to see if what, what if that happens again? Or what is something similar happens again?--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

Well, you meet, you talk about the crisis and you talk about how you handled it and you also talk about what you learned from it. What, first your handling of the crisis, what mistakes you made? What things you did well? You just kind of tweak whatever approach that you used, and discuss what you should do better the next time that comes along. And you also talk about what's going to happen? This part of it's over. What's it gonna be like six months from now? Or is it over? Is it going to come back two weeks from now? Just try to look down the road, because sometimes those type of things, you know, come up again.--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We certainly sit down and look at how we handle these things, sort of a, if you want to call it a post-crisis meeting or evaluation or debriefing. Come back and see how we handled it. See what the responses were from the

different areas, be it in the media or public sector, and see what we did well. See what we needed to do better next time and just continue to learn from there.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

### **Research during Post-Crisis**

Only one organization mentioned possibly using research conducted post-crisis, and it was mentioned as something that they could do, but actually have never done.

Most organizations want to just move on after a crisis and not revisit the situation, yet Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) recommend conducting research regarding the handling of a crisis. Specifically, the organization should talk with their publics to obtain their view on how the situation was handled and how they feel about everything that occurred.

When you've got a crisis that takes you by surprise, which is what crises usually do, you really can't do a focus group heading into that. I guess you could after the fact, you know? I don't think we've ever done that, to maybe get a focus group together after a crisis is over and review what, how we handled that crisis. But we've never done that.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

### **Reputation Management**

“The best way to avoid negative media coverage—or its recurrence—is to engage in reputation-enhancing, socially responsible activities,” according to the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995, p. 1) crisis management model.

Every organization should practice reputation management as a type of preventative public relations, so that a crisis will be minimized when it does occur (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995); therefore, this thesis addressed the question of how sports organizations use reputation management. Again, reputation management does not prevent crises, but is a form of pro-active public relations that does minimize a crisis when it does occur.

Many of the interviewees did not know what reputation management meant, but once defined or given examples, they immediately knew what techniques their organization implements

for reputation management. The definition given for reputation management was any action, ideas or things that keeps the image of the athletic department in a positive light with its publics.

Most organizations use the media for promoting their athletic department and their students' achievements outside of athletics. In addition to that, most organizations feel that the athletic department is the best advertising for the university as a whole, simply because it generates more publicity for the university. The athletic department, therefore, stresses the importance of appropriate behavior to their student athletes. The student athletes represent the university as a whole, not just the athletic program; therefore, an emphasis is placed on behavior. Personality traits such as honesty, trust and respect were words used by several organizations.

All of these examples of reputation management are in alignment with the crisis management model. Anything that promotes or maintains a positive relationship with the organization's publics is reputation management. Many organizations wish they could do more, but most have little staff or finances to accomplish all the goals they would like.

We just continue to promote the fact that we adhere to all NCAA rules, and we take the rules very seriously. And, that we strive to be in compliance with the NCAA and university policy at all times. And, I think that goes back to the honesty thing. Where we have had some problems with some athletes in the past, and we've immediately addressed the situation with the media. And, I think that's our reputation.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We do word of mouth, press releases, flyers. It's a small community. In order to get people in the stands, in order for people to respect [X] University, you have to give them something, you know, to get them, in order for them to come, they want something in return, what I've learned in the past. So, what we normally do is, we'll put up flyers. We'll go around town. We have the cheerleaders is a big thing. We try to market different people. We'll have car washes. We'll give away prizes. We'll have basketball players and the women's and men's sign basketball cards, and give away schedules in the front door of a [local store]. Community service. We do a whole lot of community service. The football team goes to nursing homes. They'll go out and...every time we do something, we always do a press release. And, then immediately we put it on our Web page, put it in the newspaper, go out and just try to say, this is not just about playing football on



the football field. It's also about giving back to the community. And, that's kind of the reputation we want to have. We send [press releases] out to all the hometowns. Every single player that comes in fills out a questionnaire, and puts their newspaper, their hometown newspaper on file. We do a distribution list on e-mail, and every single time we do a press release whether it be, you know, one setup for football, so that every single player in their hometown paper gets a press release on everything that goes on, whether it's community service, whether it's practice, a game, anything. And, a lot of the parents get it as well. We send them a media guide for their hometown paper, and we send them, a release so they kind of can keep in touch.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

That's interesting that you say that, because that is one of the reasons I'm here. I used to be the sports information director here, and the sports information director traditionally disseminates information. You write press releases. You get it out. It is very reactionary. Somebody calls and asks you a question, you give them the answer. You arrange interviews with coaches and athletes with the media. You work the press box and make sure everybody's seats are in place for them to watch the game. But in this business of college athletics, there's very little reputation management that goes on. It seems that most issues that come up with college athletics are all reactionary. And about a year ago, I was out of a job. Well, they had an opening here and [they] invited me to come back, and I gave [them] an idea of what I thought college athletics was lacking. And that was reputation management. You don't have anybody who's always looking out for the department, who'll sit in meetings and hear a decision made and say, wait a minute. Here's what the reaction to that is going to be. Here's how that's going to affect our reputation. Nobody's ever put a strategic plan in place for maintaining the reputation of the department. So I think that what we started to do here that maybe even some other schools don't because it's, it's a pro-active way of working that college athletics have just blossomed in the last 20 years as far as the number of people that work, the salaries involved, the number of people coming to the events and I don't know that the business of college athletics has reacted very well to going from just college sports to being big business. We have corporate sponsors and whether people like it or not, it is big business. We're a \$42 million operation here. And how many \$42 million operations don't have some kind of pro-active public relations operation within it and most schools don't. Most schools just have some kind of reaction. So what you don't know is how many crises have we averted? We don't know. Because if, if I'm doing my job right or if we're doing our job right, then we are averting crises everyday and so, you know, the best crisis management is that which prevents a crisis from ever happening in the first place. So I think we've done a few things over the course of time that we've averted crises. Or made them less severe. You know, crisis management, I guess, really is something that goes on everyday in how you conduct your business. If we, if we run our business in an ethical way; if a

football coach or basketball coach or baseball coach builds confidence that he's running his program in the right way, then when he, he has some renegade player who goes off and does something, they have confidence that it's a, its an abnormality in his program. They have confidence he's going to handle it right. If over the course of time, he doesn't operate in an ethical manner or he doesn't build trust with the public, then when something goes wrong they're not going to trust the way he handles it. So, public relations and crisis management really is a 24-hour a day business, if you're doing it right.--Associate Athletic Director for External Affairs-Division I-A

Well, sure, I mean, that's most of what we do, you know, is we write stuff every day and it's positive. Even if you write about ballgames that you lose. You take a positive tact whenever possible. You're always looking for the positive stuff about athletes to put out there. Which is, the athletes that are doing well academically, that are doing well in the community that are doing volunteer work. Anything that you can learn about them positively, you pass it on. Because what always happens is, the one athlete that flunks out of school becomes a big story in the paper. And, too often the hundred athletes that are doing everything right and making good grades don't have a story written about them. So, you try to get the good stories out, particularly in regard to academics and off the field things, because the winning and losing, the athletic success, that kind of takes care of itself. I mean, that's gonna be reported. That's easy for reporters to do. You have to, as an organization, as an athletic department, you have to work a little harder to find the off the field good stories and get those to the media and get the media to recognize why they're important and to run them.--Assistant Athletic Director Communications/Sports Information Director-Division I-A

Just like any other company, we try, at least on our end, in multiple ways, to make sure that our coaches, staff, student athletes understand that they represent not just the athletic department, but the whole university in everything they do, and really not just while they're here, but even after they get out of school. A lot of things they do reflect either positively or negatively on the athletic department and the university. So, a lot of the things we do is just making sure that those folks are aware that, some people don't realize that what they do can effect just their own person but their team mates, their coaches, their, the folks in the department all the way up through the entire university. So, that's basically what we try to do is, is make sure that they all understand that prior or actually right when they get here in, in early season meetings with the freshmen. And we certainly try to, that throughout the student athlete's years as well as our, as well as our athletic staff.--Assistant Athletic Director/Media Relations-Division I-AA

We strongly believe that our athletic department's image is pivotal for the perception of the university. We have the greatest opportunity to receive attention on a daily basis for our university, locally, regionally, statewide,

nationally. And, we do constantly monitor how our student athletes, how our coaches, how our department handles that responsibility. Each head coach works with his or her student athletes to remind them of their responsibilities in public relations, in image shaping, in media relations. How important it is for the university as a whole, and how beneficial it can be to them as they go forward and go into the job market and go down their professional careers to have a positive image. And, that is something that is a steady constant message, throughout their time [here].--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

I mean, you always want everything you put out to be positive because we want everybody to look at the university in a positive light and, so, you know, your reputation is a huge part of your business. If you have a bad reputation, it's going to hurt your business, whether it's college athletics or whether it's any other business. So we're always, you know, as I mentioned, trying to make sure everything's positive and that way, you know, our, our reputation nationwide, statewide, locally is a good one.--Sports Information Director-Division I-A

We usually have a beat writer that is assigned to a newspaper. We usually have certain people that cover us through the electronic media, the TV media, maintaining proper relationships, I think that's key as well as...just trying to ensure that the public sees the proper image of our university at the right time. Repetition. If it's steadily put out there that this is the type of institution we are, this is the type of behavior we expect. I think that's key, because it will also give your university or give this entity of the university, athletics, the benefit of the doubt. When a serious situation does arise. They would give us the, the first right of refusal, I guess. Give us an opportunity to get it out there before they report it. That and, you know, here at [X] University, we are in a unique situation. We don't have the finances that the [big schools have], but anytime that we can get our image out there, we want to portray it in the best light. Whether that's association with certain individuals, or maybe its someone we bring onto campus for commencement exercise or whatever, you always want your name associated, with the best, not just that, get name recognition. If your university can be synonymous with a big name that is out there right now, that always helps. I still think that the best crisis management that we have for our universities is our athletic department. Just because of the advertising. On a [X] University Saturday, there's nothing like 30-35,000 people in [our stadium] to see just how well behaved, just how good a product, just how good a university [X] University is.--Sports Information Director-Division I-AA

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

These findings seem to support certain aspects of the crisis management model, however, none of the organizations follow the model exactly. Most were lacking in certain areas, while excelling in others. Some organizations seem to have more trouble following the model, which they accredited to their lack of staff and lack of finances. The inability of all of these organizations to implement more proactive public relations or to conduct formal research causes these organizations to operate in a reactionary mode.

### **R. 1. How do sports organizations handle crises?**

Regarding phase one, issues management, most of the sports organizations interviewed followed the model with informal research. They all networked and read a lot in order to keep on top of issues concerning their industry. If they felt the issue would affect their organization, they took the appropriate steps to prevent the situation from occurring at their organization. What most of the organizations lacked was formal research regarding issues management. Few ever have the time or resources to conduct any type of formal research, such as surveys, focus groups or interviews.

Regarding phase two, planning and prevention, some of the sports organizations had plans, whether they were written or in their heads. A few had no plans at all, written or otherwise; this does not follow the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model. The organizations without plans tended to be organizations without the staff or budget to allow such planning. Again, most organizations lacked the formal research necessary to create a plan of action.

Yet, when it came to prevention, every organization had education programs or communication strategies in place to prevent habitual crises that plague the sports industry. Most relied on others for their educational material, whether it was a university entity or the NCAA.

Some provided the education based on their coaching staff's experience. Once again, formal research played little part in their prevention of crises.

Organizations that have communication strategies in place to prevent a crisis do follow the crisis management model. This aspect calls for all the decision makers and those that implement the communication to be involved in the process.

Regarding phase three, the crisis, most organizations handled a crisis by closing ranks and discussing the appropriate way to manage the situation. Again, some of the organizations do not have the financial or staff resources to handle a crisis as well as other organizations. Third-party support was mentioned by every organization; even the organizations that cannot afford to seek out paid experts. These organizations said they rely on help and advice from whomever is willing. This is one aspect where every organization is in alignment, yet, once again; formal research plays no part in this phase.

Regarding phase four, post-crisis, most organizations informally evaluated their performance during the crisis, which follows the model. Yet, no organization developed a long-term communication strategy to negate the damage done by the crisis, nor did any organization perform formal research post-crisis. These are definitely areas of importance that should be addressed. A crisis is an opportunity to learn from and to reconnect with the organization's publics.

The findings of this thesis points out the areas in which these sports organizations indeed do follow the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model, and points out the areas in which these organizations' performance is lacking. The areas tended to be planning and research.

Some larger and some smaller organizations, size based on their Division I ranking, answered some of the questions in complete alignment with the model, whereas other large and small organizations had trouble answering the questions. Some smaller organizations seem more

able to handle their public relations and crises better with less staff and money than larger organizations with more staff and more money.

The majority of the organizations lacked any type of formal planning or research. Most seemed to have ideas on how to handle things, yet were flying by the seats of their pants. This can be a disastrous way to handle a crisis.

Most sports public relations practitioners know the players on a personal level; many said their organization is an extended family. This family dynamic adds another dimension to the situation when a crisis occurs. Just as Fearn-Banks (1996) said, the public relations professionals may not be able to separate their personal feelings from their professional duties, making a crisis plan even more necessary. With a prepared plan to follow, public relations professionals will not have to think so much about what to do. Proper planning and research can guide the public relations practitioner in the correct direction.

## **R. 2. What is an effective technique when dealing with a crisis?**

The most effective technique when dealing with a crisis seems to be to tell the truth as quick as possible, and take the consequences that are delved out. Every organization agreed telling the truth was the most important thing an organization could do during a crisis. One interviewee even went as far as saying it speeds the crisis cycle up when the truth comes out quickly, and the consequences are delved out quickly.

Most of the organizations felt by doing so the media and their publics would trust them more when it came to future situations. In addition to that, trust, a few organizations said that the truth would come out anyway, and then the organization would have a bigger mess to deal with. The organization would then have to explain why it withheld information, which some people consider lying or telling half-truths.

The “truth” aspect fits the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1995) crisis management model, but more importantly, the telling of the truth right away fits the model even better in regards to reputation management, another aspect of public relations that Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt recommends.

This technique can be applied during phase three, the crisis. At this stage in the crisis, the organization cannot prevent a situation. They, therefore, can only tell their publics what they know, and what they are going to do. By being honest and upfront about the situation, the organization can possibly avert additional negative publicity, which is also in alignment with the model in phase three.

**R. 3. What is the most effective part of the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model?**

The respondents’ perceived the most effective part of the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model to be issues management. Every interviewee applied issues management to his organization’s daily operations. In addition, everyone employed the research technique scanning the environment.

No one, however, knew the term scanning the environment, and few knew the term issues management. Once the term was defined for them or examples given, every organization admitted to networking, reading and scanning the environment regarding issues pertinent to their organization. Many spoke of using the Internet and e-mail for research regarding issues management. Others spoke of yearly meetings and professional organizations that were used to gather information.

If an issue could affect their organization, discussion and preventative steps were taken. This type of management of issues prevents some crises from occurring, and is an important phase in the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model.

These three research questions and answers provide valuable insights into nine sports organizations' handling of crises. The findings can be used to better meet the needs of organizations and the needs of their publics, and can be used by academia as a stepping stone into an area of interest not much studied by academics.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations come to mind regarding this thesis. The research question regarding the most effective part of the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt model can not be answered except based on the respondents' perception. To find out the most effective part of the model one would have to perform a pretest and post-test with quantitative findings.

When dealing with qualitative research, one argument for a limitation is that the researcher is too ingrained in the data. In addition, that the interview data can be framed based on the questions the researcher asks the participant, and based on the quotes the researcher chooses to report in the findings. This may be a true limitation regarding this thesis, since many key informants did not know the definition to terms such as issues management and reputation management. Likewise, when asked about research, many were puzzled. By the researcher defining the terms or giving examples, one feels the answers could possibly be framed based on the information given to the interviewee to elucidate the questions.

Another weakness associated with interview research concerns its ability to generalize its findings. The findings of this thesis are specific to the nine sports organizations interviewed and can not be generalized to all sports organizations, however, the findings can be used by other sports organizations as a learning tool.

To enhance the findings of this thesis more questions should have been asked regarding the public relations practitioners' education and the organizations' budgets for public relations. These



questions could provide the answer to why some small sports organizations practice better crisis management and reputation management than other small or large sports organizations.

In addition to those questions, questions regarding research should have been broken down into the four phases to clarify the question and its answers. Each phase should have had its own research question, thereby eliminating any confusion towards the subject.

## **Further Research**

Since sports crisis management is a relatively untouched topic by academia, and since sports crises are prolific, many questions come to mind when thinking of further research regarding this thesis. Why were there so many gaps in the organizations' knowledge? Why were they in alignment with certain aspects of the model and completely out of alignment with other aspects? Why did one organization know more regarding how to handle a crisis than another?

Why did some large organizations know how to better handle a crisis than other large organizations? Same question with small organizations, how did some small organizations know how to better handle a crisis than other small organizations or even large organizations? One would think that larger organizations with larger budgets would be better able to handle a crisis. The findings varied greatly between large and small organizations.

These questions could be addressed by interviewing the organizations further about the number of employees in their department, staff education, budget and experiences with crises. All of these questions could be a basis for further research.

With a topic such as sports that has not been thoroughly studied by academia, yet is growing in popularity and money, there are many areas for further research. The research ideas are limitless.

This thesis, therefore, adds to the body of knowledge regarding sports crisis management (Anderson, 2001, 2003; Cutlip, 1989) and sports public relations (Anderson, 2001, 2003; Cutlip,

1989; Fortunato, 2000) by looking at how sports organizations handle a crisis and comparing the data to a crisis management model. In addition, the findings of this thesis allow sports public relations practitioners the opportunity to learn from the nine organizations interviewed, thereby fulfilling a societal good. Organizations that learn from the findings of this thesis and implement suggestions from the Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt crisis management model will have better relationships with their constituencies, and have less crises to face in the future.

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## **APPENDIX A: LETTER REQUESTING INTERVIEW**

July 7, 2003

Mr. Mike T. Tiger  
LSU Sports  
123 First Street  
Baton Rouge, LA 12345

Dear Mr. Tiger:

I am Jamie Mabile Delatte, a graduate student in the School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University with a concentration in public relations. My thesis research is on how sports organizations such as yours handle crises.

It would be very beneficial to me, as well as other public relations practitioners, if I could have 30 minutes of time from your busy schedule to interview you for my research. The interview would be at your convenience and could be in person or by telephone. You can also decide if you wish to disclose your name and the name of your organization in my final research.

I will contact your office within the next week to discuss a time that is convenient for us to talk. I can be reached by phone at 225-635-6815 or 225-978-3159 or by e-mail at [j\\_delatte@msn.com](mailto:j_delatte@msn.com). I would be extremely grateful for your time and assistance with my research.

Sincerely,

Jamie Mabile Delatte



## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

1. Study Title: How Should Sports Organizations Handle a Crisis?
2. Performance Site: Various locations dependent on interviewees convenience
3. Investigators: Jamie Mabile Delatte 225-635-6815  
LSU Graduate Student of Public Relations [j\\_delatte@msn.com](mailto:j_delatte@msn.com)  
  
Dr. Lori Boyer 225-578-3488  
LSU Professor of Public Relations [lboyer@lsu.edu](mailto:lboyer@lsu.edu)
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to determine how sports public relations practitioners handle crises compared to a crisis management model.
5. Subjects: The subject must work full-time in the public relations department of the sports organization.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The study will consist of an interview guide with no more than 10 open-ended questions geared towards the organizations' public relations practices. The qualitative interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes, not extending past one hour. The interview will be recorded for verbatim transcription to be used as the data for the thesis.
8. Benefits: Interviewees will yield valuable insights into how public relations practitioners perform crisis communications versus a crisis management model, thus giving back to the public relations profession.
9. Risks: There are no known risks.
10. Right to Refuse: Participation in the study is voluntary and subjects may change their mind and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they may otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: The utmost privacy allowed by law.
12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Jamie Mabile Delatte is a May 1989 graduate of West Feliciana High School. She graduated from Louisiana State University in May 1993 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in mass communication, with a concentration in advertising and a minor in history.

After graduation, she joined the staff of Suburban Press as an Account Executive selling ads for its newspapers. She later resigned her position to rear her twin boys. After holding miscellaneous part time positions through the years and the birth of her third son, she decided to return to school in the Fall of 2001 to pursue a Master of Mass Communication degree with a concentration in public relations. She will receive her degree in December of 2003.

After graduation, Jamie would like to pursue a career in public relations, specifically reputation management.