

Generating buzz or driving attendance? The influence of story type and source on university sports fan attitudes and behavioral intentions

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Sports information directors play an important role for university athletic departments by serving as the primary media contacts. These individuals work with the media on an ongoing basis to manage team and game coverage. As a result of their media relationships, SIDs are used by athletic directors to facilitate communication with the media and are often the first people contacted by a media member developing a story. This places SIDs in a unique position. They have opportunities to advise athletic directors on strategic communication responses and to influence media coverage through their media interactions. However, due to a lack of research on sports-related topics at universities, their decisions and recommendations are typically based on past experience or intuition.

A majority of the media relations work by SIDs helps media members produce game stories that may have a limited impact on sports fan behaviors. If the stories are read primarily by people who are already sports fans, their ability to generate additional revenue generation is diminished. An alternative media relations tactic that may be more effective at attracting new fans is the development and placement of human interest stories. This study explores the impact of athletic promotion and its ability to generate interest and eventually to produce behavior change within a target public. To accomplish this, we compare differences between a commonly used media relations tactic (a game story) and a less frequently used, but potentially persuasive, tactic (an athlete human interest story). Source manipulations are used to explore differences between stories distributed in a controlled manner by a university vs. an uncontrolled manner through a media organization, and to gain a better understanding of media credibility perceptions among a critical target public for university athletic departments.

An experiment was conducted to evaluate the impact of story type and story source on a variety of sports fan behaviors. Results showed that while story type influenced buzz, stories attributed to a national sports media organization influenced actual game attendance intentions. An interaction effect showed that game stories from the athletic department and human interest stories from an outside source produced the highest interest among participants in watching a game.