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Media Relations/Crisis Comm. Case Study Paper

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The Tiger Woods Crisis

Introduction

When Americans think golf, they think Tiger Woods. Woods' influence on the game is unarguably profound and forever influential. The 33-year-old athlete has 14 major golf tournaments in his name as he contends for the record held by Jack Nicklaus with 18 wins of major golf tournaments ("How Tiger Flubbed"). Woods' image was defined by his incredible focus and discipline as well as the idea of being the "squeaky-clean family man" ("How Tiger Flubbed"). Prior to his crisis, his reputation was similar to his athletic status – simply the best. His skills made him into an endorsing machine as he averaged \$100 million a year making him the world's first \$1 billion athlete ("How Tiger Flubbed").

Woods' was born December 30, 1975 in Cypress, California with the official name of Eldrick Tont Woods. He is the only child of a Thai mother and African-American father who was an army officer. Woods' received his nickname "Tiger" from his father in honor of his friend and fellow soldier. His father, Earl taught and mentored him as the game of golf came early for Woods. By age eight, he appeared on national television displaying his skills. Woods attended Stanford University where he won numerous amateur U.S. golf titles. His professional golf career began in 1996 at age 21. He then became the youngest man and first African-American to win the Title of the U.S. Masters in 1997 which was the event that hurled him into stardom ("Tiger Woods Biography").

In regards to his personal life, in October of 2004 Woods married his longtime girlfriend, Elin Nordegren. The year 2006 brought Woods much grief as his father died in May to prostate cancer. Woods acknowledged him as his best friend and greatest role model. Despite his grievance, his game stayed steady as he won several events two of which were the PGA championship and the British Open. The following year his first child was born making him not only a role model athlete but a father-figure as well ("Tiger Woods Biography").

Synopsis of Crisis

Friday, November 27, 2009 Woods crashed his Cadillac Escalade outside his Florida home at an early morning hour. This was the match that lit a fire to a chain of events that exposed his personal life to the world. As a result, Woods refused to speak with the media in regards to the incident. Instead, Woods turned to Mark Steinberg, his longtime agent and close friend to communicate for him. Although Steinberg would describe Woods as one of his best friends, "he doesn't allow the friendship to cloud his business judgments (Albergotti)". Additionally, he hired Mark NeJame, a well-known criminal defense attorney in the Orlando area, to handle matters in his defense (Albergotti).

Following Friday morning's accident, Woods refused to speak to the police investigators and the media (McCarthy). The only direct communication he had was in the form of two statements posted on his webpage (Albergotti). Much controversy arose over his initial communication to the media and his publics. About three months passed without any public appearance or communication, Woods held a much anticipated press conference on February 19, 2010 (Skipper). To the publics' dismay, he read a typed 14 minute apology that was perceived as minimal effort on his behalf, however he did admit to his infidelity. An NBC article quotes Richard Auletta who is the president of R.C. Auletta and Co. as saying, "First off, he looked like

a deer in head lights. I tell people if you can't read with a great deal of sincerity, you're crazy to do it that way. It was a badly staged effort that clearly had taken a lot of thought, but he might as well have sent out a press release ("Manhattan Crisis-Management")." Woods did address his behavior and said he was "irresponsible and selfish" and went on to say that he recognized how much he disappointed everyone and he is the only one to blame for the incident (Skipper). As a result of Wood's delayed response and apology the media and publics began feeling as though he had something to hide. The apology was meant to "stop the bleeding, Woods didn't get it done" (Skipper).

Not only was there controversy over Wood's communication with the media and his publics, but rumors were started that his firm was working on paying off a woman named Rachel Uchitel to keep quiet about the alleged affair of which she and Woods refused to comment on (Albergotti). It made it obvious she would soon be speaking with the media when she was seen at Los Angeles International Airport with her celebrity attorney Gloria Allred (Sullivan).

A widely asked question during this crisis was whether or not golf could survive without Woods. He is the guy who won with a broken leg, pumping fists, and intense stares and yet, he has not fought back at this crisis standing up. As writer Sean Gregory puts it, "Woods never punched back, leaving reasonable people to wonder whether it's all true ("Can Golf Survive"). Viewers may actually watch golf to see how the networks handle his absence or to hear what fellow golfers have to say about his given situation. Gregory also questioned if the networks would ignore the crisis. However, he believes that would be a "silly strategy" since golf fans are not dumb and the media has "no reason to fear Tiger's wrath" ("Can Golf Survive"). If Woods were to return, would he still be good? Insight warns fans they need a backup plan because if he

does return, he may not be the golfer he once was. Gregory quote, “Wow, it’s official: Tiger’s fight is all gone. The claws are clipped. And now we can honestly wonder: Will they ever come back (“Can Golf Survive”)?

In reference to Woods’ endorsers, he originally held a contract with about twelve different sponsors (“Gatorade”). The crisis left sports marketers with tough decisions. Standing by his side could potentially alienate consumers as a result of his allegations (“Tiger Woods Endorsements”). After the incident, Tag Heuer, Accenture, Gillette, AT&T and Gatorade had either cut or suspended ties with Woods leaving him with seven official sponsors. The two larger companies that stayed close with Woods were Nike and Electronic Arts Inc. However, Nike was undoubtedly his biggest advocate (“Gatorade”). Woods and Nike’s relationship began in 1996 when he made his professional debut. Woods has helped make Nike golf a \$659 million business which happens to be less than four percent of Nike’s overall revenue. As a result, reports show Woods receiving \$30 million each year. Nike’s chairman Phil Knight explained Nike’s stance and mindset on the issue when he told *Sports Business Journal*, “I think he has been really great. When his career is over, you’ll look back on these indiscretions as a minor blip, but the media is making a big deal out of it right now (“Tiger Woods Endorsements”).” Essentially, Nike feels Woods’ “bad” could never take away from what he has accomplished and brought to the sport of golf. However, Woods’ endorsers lost somewhere between \$5-12 billion in wealth and his top five sponsors lost two to three percent of their collective market value following the incident (Knittel).

After being analyzed by media and fans, it is safe to say Woods is on his way to recovery. Despite his divorce, he stepped back on the green and recently competed in the 2011 Masters as

a top contender. The fans were extremely supportive as crowds stood watching him practice putting. Woods has arrived and is finally ready to punch back.

Synopsis/Analysis of Journalism Coverage

Woods was always in the media for his phenomenal achievements in golf but come November 27, 2009 that all changed. The media swarmed Woods for information, but because he would not talk, their stories were not so much factual as they were “hear say” and rumors that the accident was a result of a fight he had with his wife over a suspected mistress. The day after Woods crashed his car the Florida Highway Patrol was on their way to his home for questioning. Before arrival, they received a phone call from Steinberg informing them that “his client wouldn’t be talking” (Albergotti). As a result, journalists began writing articles about Woods’ lack of communication and how that was in turn hurting his case. Ray Artigue, the president of Phoenix public relations firm and former general chairman of the PGA Tour’s Phoenix Open stated, “He’s getting bad [public-relations] counsel. Leaving important questions unanswered allows them to linger and create suspicions about his conduct (Albergotti).” And that is exactly what happened. Rumors became numerous and truth was lacking. People as well as the media understood Woods’ desire to keep the issues private between him and Elin but it was unrealistic. Writer Kevin Sullivan reiterates the point that the media wants answers and will not let the issue go until they are satisfied (Sullivan).

Many of the articles pertaining to Woods and his incident reflect on how he should have handled his public relations crisis. The initial articles that were published gave pieces of the story and had many unanswered questions as to how Woods would deal with the issue and how it would affect his career. As time went on and Woods failed to communicate and the media became extremely frustrated. They had little facts and hardly anything to give the public. Once

Woods finally held his first conference call three months following the incident, the media immediately began nit-picking. Half of the journalists' articles reflected on crisis management 101 and how Woods once again failed. However, the other half found his approach to be appropriate and defended his communication timeline.

Overall, journalists were glued to Woods' case because of his fame. Despite the limited information they were given, they managed to produce numerous articles whether they pertained to the crisis, Woods' communication, or questions the fans were asking, like if he would continue his golf career or if endorsers would drop him. Additionally, there were many blogs with personal opinions and insight to the incident.

Synopsis/Analysis of Crisis Management/Media Relations Performance

Aside from the media's battle against Woods, they had a battle within themselves. Coverage varied from writers supporting Woods' communication decisions to writers who totally disagreed with his course of action. Essentially, they all addressed the same issues and a pattern is seen in their arguments of whether Woods was right to keep silent or whether silence damaged his case more.

As previously mentioned Woods waited three months to address his crisis aside from a few comments he posted via the internet. As a result, opinions flew. In a USA TODAY article by Michael McCarthy he quotes Joseph DiBenedetto, a criminal defense attorney, saying, "Unless you're willing to tell 100% of what happened, you're better off remaining silent. It's the half-truths that come back to bite you (McCarthy)." For many fans the half truth left many lingering questions. The half truth made Woods look like he had something to hide. His fans would need more information before forgiveness happened.

It is true when graduate student Jennifer Kennedy puts it, “Fans expect a lot from sporting celebrities, and though they constantly want to know more about them, fans are quick to judge any problems or imperfect qualities. However, fans seem to forgive some athletes faster than they forgive others, if they forgive them at all, when indiscretions occur (Kennedy).” She explains that two influential pieces are a sincere apology from the athlete and the success they have in their respective sport (Kennedy). Woods had the success, but did he have the sincere apology in a timely manner?

In reference to Woods’ crisis management, he did some things right and others wrong. The fact that he waited so long was a negative move on his behalf because the media took it as though he had something to hide (Skipper). If Woods would have come out earlier with a statement, writer Liz McNeil feels that, “He would have taken all the oxygen out of all the women’s statements” but instead one after another women spoke up saying they too had affairs with Woods (McNeil). The public and media needed to know what happened and why, and by Woods avoiding the inevitable, he prolonged the process. Writer Roseanne Colletti puts it this way, “I usually tell them ‘take a breath and think of this as a kidney stone, it’s gonna’ hurt a lot but as soon as it passes it’s over (“Manhattan Crisis-Management”).”

Well -known Australian blogger, Geoff Barbaro, would disagree with opinions that Woods was wrong to wait. He draws his argument in the perspective of family. Barbaro challenges his readers to think about Elin and their daughter. Should they not have time as a family to work things out before letting the public weigh in on their personal situation that has great influence on their future as well as their daughter’s? Barbaro says yes and would say this was a positive move by Woods. “So many of us say that family comes first, but then we completely ignore family in this situation and focus on the Tiger Brand. So let’s get back to

some reality here ("The "Tiger Woods Crisis")". Barbaro raises a valid point. Family is greater than losing a sponsor therefore fans and media need to take a step back and understand that his family was his first priority not the media ("The "Tiger Woods Crisis"). Additionally, crisis manager, Weic Dezenhall, would agree with Barbaro that Woods made the right move but for the reason that Woods is not used to answering hard questions. If Woods would have held a press conference immediately following his accident, Desenhall believes it would have been a failure and Woods would not do well under fire (McCarthy).

Recommendations on Handling Crisis

Every fan has their own opinions as to how Woods should have dealt with the crisis, but professional Kevin Sullivan, founder of his own communication firm and former White House communications director under President George W. Bush, gives three suggestions as to what Woods should have done regarding his communication. First he says to not delay. Woods had a great opportunity to hold a press conference prior to the Chevron World Challenge which benefits his along with others' charities. By doing this, Sullivan suggests it would minimize his incident and refocus attention on the golf tournament and how it benefits his organization. Secondly, if he has something to own up to, he should do so in order to receive forgiveness. Lastly, disarm critics with a sense of humor. A suggestion was made to have said the crash was a result of his excitement for Black Friday shopping. Sullivan makes a good point when he says, "Anything that actually addresses the incident will bring Woods one step closer to putting it behind him (Sullivan)." Similar advice was given in an article from MSNBC. The first piece of advice was to again, not wait. The second was to not run from the truth because of the potential rumors that can form. Lastly, do not hide. People need to see you in order to get a sense of sincerity ("How Tiger Flubbed").

Perhaps, Woods should have looked to Kobe Bryant for advice. Bryant, an NBA star, was charged with sexual assault in 2003. However, the charges were dropped because the so-called victim refused to testify. Therefore, a civil suit was settled out of court. Like Woods, Bryant had the “squeaky-clean reputation” and was seen as a good citizen and family man (Kennedy). Bryant was actually the third most sought out athlete with endorsers. Immediately following the accusations, he spoke with the *Los Angeles Times* and claimed his innocence. However, once DNA tests proved otherwise, (that he did actually engage in intercourse with the victim) he called a press conference admitting his fault in committing adultery but not rape. During his statement his wife stood by his side to exemplify her support, he apologized for his wrong action of committing adultery, and he publicly apologized to his wife. Writer Jennifer Kennedy states, “The statements lent credibility to Bryant’s case by illustrating his strong relationship with his wife and past precedent of good behavior (Kennedy).” Additionally, Bryant cooperated with authorities showing he had nothing to hide. After his initial interaction with the media, Bryant kept quiet to let the issue surpass. In the end, his jersey is still one of the highest selling as he fully recovered and won in the court of public opinion (Kennedy).

It is quite obvious Woods did not follow the same steps as Bryant. Perhaps Woods’ crisis would have been shorter and less criticized by fans and media if he would have admitted his fault right away. Although Babaro argues Woods needed to concentrate on his family, maybe he would have been more successful with his family if he satisfied the media and then stayed quiet.

Recommendations for the Future

It is almost impossible to avoid crises all together. As a result Woods needs to look back on this crisis and honestly examine his actions and how he dealt with the situation. It would be smart for him to take note on the positives and negatives earlier discussed in order to prepare him

for any future issues. He will most likely never make the same mistake again and future crisis may be on a much smaller scale, but Woods needs to figure out how to win in the court of public opinion.

After reading Bryant's crisis and how he dealt with it, although cliché, it is safe to say – "honesty is the best policy". Woods owes it to his fans and the media to be honest and transparent. Yes, it is his personal life but he plays a large role in the public arena and as a result his decisions and actions affect more than just himself. From now on Woods needs to show his face early with sincerity to the public and clear up the situation as soon as possible. After that, like Bryant, he can lay low and work on the personal part.

In the end, media has great power and will not stop fighting until they get what they want. In order to make future situation less publicized and have shorter media attention, Woods needs to practice open, two-way symmetrical communication. The media's tone could potentially be less harsh if he is willing to work with them and answer questions. It all boils down to effective communication. Writer Steve Adubato summarizes it best when he says, "When it comes to crisis communication, what you say matters a lot. But, when you say it often what matters a lot more (Skipper)".

Conclusion

At the end of the day, superstar or not, Woods is a human being prone to failure and mistakes. Nothing about being famous exempts him of this trait and it is important the media and his fans understand that. Yes, Woods is a major role model for many children and even adults, but that is what makes his job that much harder. His life is under a magnifying glass but that comes with the territory.

Overall, Woods had a difficult crisis to deal with because it was so personal. Although, it is argued Woods waited too long to address his crisis and as a result turned the scenario into a larger media scandal than needed. You live and learn, and that is exactly what Woods did. In the end effective, transparent, two-way communication with the media will heighten chances of a more accurate story, diffuse rumors, and help in the court of public opinion.

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