Applying the Public Relations Function to the Business of Sport
Abstract

In today’s competitive business environment, it is increasingly the case that in order to attract and keep customers and others interested and loyal to the organisation, high quality products and services are no longer enough. Contemporary organisations have come to understand that they can differentiate themselves and their offerings and also gain competitive advantage by developing the public relations function as part of their communications and relationship building strategies. This same understanding is also true for sports organisations and the promotion of the sport product. The transactions and relationships that exist in all modern sports are frequently of a commercial nature and it is now the case that “Market pressure imposes an instrumental rationality on sporting institutions, just as it tends to do so on the institutions that comprise civil society as a whole.” A direct result of the complex nature of contemporary sport and the way in which it has developed into a consumer commodity has resulted in a much greater interest in how sports are managed and organised.

Public relations practice in sport is rarely evident yet to the contemporary sport business it has much to offer. Research was conducted in order to find out if and how professional sports organisations use public relations. Cricket was particularly chosen because though not enjoying the same popularity as soccer in the UK, it does have an extremely loyal following and widespread support at grass roots level. A critical finding from this research is that the communications strategies recommended for use in cricket, are equally applicable and can undoubtedly offer the same potential benefits to all sports.

Applying the Public Relations Function to the Business of Sport

“Sport personifies much of what humanity is about: community, the pursuit of physical excellence and the full range of emotions.” (Smith and Westerbeek, 2004)

There can be no doubt that for huge numbers of consumers, sport is of vital importance. Whether they consume their sport as participants or observers, people are spending increasing amounts of time and money in the process of sports consumption. Some sports have far greater numbers of consumers than others and the compelling attractions of the shopping mall and other leisure pursuits are becoming recognised as powerful competition. Also, it is very obvious that in order for sporting organisations to compete and survive in the marketplace, they have to, whether they like it or not, become much more business oriented.

This paper is a qualitative critical evaluation and analysis of the current level of public relations activity in English domestic First Class County cricket. The paper is the outcome of research which began in September 2002 and which was concluded in April 2003. The basis for this paper is a completed case study of Durham and Yorkshire County Cricket Clubs. These two clubs were chosen as the focus of the research because Durham CCC is the youngest First Class County Club and Yorkshire is one of the oldest, two very different organisations, then, operating in the same industry sector and market place. Both clubs currently reside in the second division of the English County Championship, are culturally and ideologically very different and, because they are both located in the North of England, are great rivals.

Compared with soccer, and despite being, as far as some are concerned, the original national sport, cricket has not attracted anywhere near the same amount of support and financial backing. As a spectator sport, cricket is facing the fact that the traditional structure of the game does not have wide appeal. The governing body for UK cricket, the England and Wales
Cricket Board (ECB) is funding and promoting initiatives to widen the appeal of cricket from providing cricket equipment to inner city schools to encouraging greater participation in the sport by women. At the professional level, although the National team attracts sponsorship and significant ECB backing, the County teams are finding that in order to remain viable business and sporting propositions, they have to increasingly adopt a strategic vision. A fundamental component of this strategic vision is the creation of successful marketing and communications strategies that will contribute to the bottom line and ultimate long-term survival of the Club.

In today’s increasingly competitive business environment, the realisation is dawning that in order to attract and keep customers and others interested and loyal to the organisation, high quality products and services are no longer enough. Contemporary organisations have come to understand that they can differentiate themselves and their offerings and also gain competitive advantage by developing the public relations function as part of their communications and relationship building strategies. This same understanding is also true for sports organisations. The transactions and relationships that exist in all modern sports are frequently of a commercial nature and it is now the case that, according to Hargreaves and others, market pressure imposes an instrumental rationality on sporting institutions, just as it tends to do so on the institutions that comprise civil society as a whole.

A direct result of the complex nature of contemporary sport and the way in which it has developed into something of a consumer commodity has resulted in a much greater interest in how sports are managed and organised. The modern perspective of sport is that it has evolved dramatically from its position as an important social phenomenon during the 1960s into its current status as a significant economic and political phenomenon. Now, in the early years of the 21st century, sport is widely regarded as a cultural subsystem of modern society.
As a result of the vast numbers of individuals who regularly participate in watch or otherwise engage in sporting activities, it has also become big business.

This study was conducted in order to find out if and how professional cricket clubs use public relations. Cricket, though not enjoying the same popularity as soccer, does have an extremely loyal following and widespread support at grass roots level. The sport does, however, suffer from a serious and long-held image problem, which is proving difficult to reverse and which is undoubtedly affecting cricket’s potential to attract essential media and financial support. The England and Wales Cricket Board does have a marketing orientation and disseminates good practice throughout the eighteen First Class County Clubs. Each club, however, is responsible for promoting the game at a local level but it is evident that no unified or consistent promotional strategy currently exists.

Public relations is still considered to be a young profession and by some as a disreputable activity. However, public relations is proving to be a valuable tool in the organisational armoury and it is felt that it is of just as much value to the sporting organisation as to the business organisation. Primary research was conducted with marketing and public relations professionals, playing and coaching staff and sponsorship and media managers. The consensus is that public relations is essential to the future success of the sport but the reality is that it is not formally implemented to the extent that it should be or, in the opinion of many within the game, needs to be.

It is an accepted fact that professional sport is one of the major profit and loss industries in our contemporary society. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the most popular leisure pursuits in the Western world are sports related, involving countless numbers of individuals as participants or observers and many more in the highly profitable business of satisfying innumerable sports related needs and wants. Although modern sport’s contribution to the global economy is indisputable, it is surprising to learn that, as Horne et al observe, one
striking feature of much sport is precisely the way that it is not organised as a business. The main reason that most sports are seemingly uncomfortable with the associations of capitalism and entrepreneurship is that they remain heavily influenced by their historical developmental traditions.

Modern cricket, perhaps more than most contemporary popular sports, struggles not only with the legacy of its privileged past but also with the fact that it is, in Birley’s words, freighted with extraneous moral overtones. The widespread practice of describing unacceptable behaviour as ‘not cricket’ helps to perpetuate the myth that cricket is the gold standard for the sportsmanlike behaviour that belongs to the age of imperialism and gentility. As a direct result of this legacy, professional cricket, has, as Birley goes on to say, struggled to keep pace with the tempo of the age, and has sometimes seemed to be lost in a dream-world of past glories and outworn social attitudes. An outcome of this is that cricket has found regarding itself as a business particularly problematic and, accordingly, provided the main impetus for this study.

Most modern spectator sports, of necessity, operate as businesses and are having to adopt and adapt to the core business functions of marketing, finance and human resource management. Soccer has long enjoyed success as a business venture, a fact that is borne out by the huge financial sums that have become commonplace in the game. Cricket, on the other hand, has shown a reluctance to express itself in business terms but has come to accept that if it is to survive and compete for media and supporter attention, it has to modernise and behave as a commercial enterprise. In order to maintain its licence to operate, cricket must regard itself as part of the entertainment industry and compete for its share of the global market. A key objective of this strategy is building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with a range of publics, an objective that can only be achieved through the systematic and structured implementation of excellent public relations.
Contemporary professional cricket is having to face considerable challenges, the most pressing of which is to generate interest in what is seen by many as a game which belongs to a bygone age being played at stuffy and unwelcoming county clubs. If cricket is to have a viable future, it must address its image problems and must become more appealing to a demographically different audience than has traditionally been the case. Public relations, more than the other elements of the contemporary promotional mix, offers a potential solution. UK sport generally and cricket especially have yet to reap the potential rewards offered by adopting a strategic public relations philosophy, yet, as is evident from the findings of this research, where a public relations focus exists, there is much to be gained.

It is encouraging to note that cricket in the UK has undergone some significant developments since this research began and that public relations has played a significant part in these innovations. In June 2003, the Twenty20 Cup was launched surrounded by some traditional English doubts and complaints from the cricket establishment that such a game was just “not cricket”. However, Twenty20 cricket in 2004 is proving to be exactly the kind of product that appeals to a range of different publics and cricket grounds throughout the country have been reporting sell-out attendances for these games. It is evident that this shorter form of cricket is pumping new life-blood into the game. 2004 sees the first international version of Twenty20, a match to be played between the England and New Zealand women’s cricket teams. In July 2005, Australia will play England in the first full Twenty20 international match at Lords, the home of cricket. In order to demonstrate the ever-growing appeal of shorter form cricket in the global sports arena, July 2004 saw the inaugural ProCricket matches being played in the US and a similar version is being played in South Afria. As well as offering an alternative to the traditional cricket format, Twenty20 is proving to be exactly the type of product extension that the game needs. As Lawrence Booth says “Call it hit-and-giggle if you like. Call it fast food. Call it blasphemy. Just don’t call it irrelevant.”
Methods

The research interest was to analyse public relations practice in English County Cricket and to offer a strategy for effective, proactive public relations. By using a case study approach, the primary research conducted for this study revealed the extent to which key stakeholder publics in contemporary First Class County cricket understand and utilise public relations. Case studies were written on Durham and Yorkshire County Cricket Clubs focusing on, amongst other things, issues of regional identity and the differing operational practices of both a young modern club and one that has a long and successful cricket history. Communication and relationship building strategies were analysed and by applying key theoretical principles of public relations, insight and understanding has occurred into a sport, which is frequently both misunderstood but overlooked. A key finding from the research is that the communications strategies recommended for use in cricket, are equally applicable and can offer the same potential benefits to all sports.

The English are frequently characterised and even stereotyped as being passionate about sport. As well as actively participating in the whole range of sports for leisure and fitness reasons, as a nation, we spend huge amounts of our free time as sport spectators either in front of our televisions and radios, or live at the ground or stadium. According to Cashmore, the contemporary fascination with sport has much to do with the fact that by consuming sport in various ways, we view and do for nothing more functional than avoiding what we do during the rest of our working week. It is therefore unsurprising that sport has, over recent years, become the focus for extensive academic research. A large part of such research has been conducted in the area of sports science but as the amounts of money to be made in and by sports increase, they and their participants have become lucrative business prospects. As a result, sports marketing and promotions have become and continue to be fruitful and dynamic areas of study.
In the UK, the sport that captures most attention in terms of spectators, finance the media and academics is “the national game” – soccer. As a nation, the English are fanatical soccer supporters and even if individuals are not supporters of particular clubs, the whole country will grind to a halt in order to be able to watch England beat Argentina. The patriotic fervour widely reported in the media during May and June 2002 and the attendant “feel-good factor” that was enjoyed by both business and society during the time that the national soccer team was keeping the country’s World Cup glory hopes alive, are both significant illustrators of the power that sport can exert over a vast range of publics.

Although cricket is played and watched all over the world by huge numbers of people, it is only those who are interested in the game who will have been aware of the 2003 Cricket World Cup. It undoubtedly attracted media coverage and offered a whole range of sponsorship and commercial opportunities, but these will all have been to a much lesser extent than is the case with soccer. Cricket generally has been rather slow to capitalise on the enormous potential benefits of customer relationship building, perhaps having a tendency to be somewhat complacent about supporter loyalty. Why is this? What is it about cricket that has given it the perceived status of soccer’s “poor relation”? What can be done to get cricket off the back pages and into the lifestyle sections of the newspapers? Why do cricket clubs not attract the same kind of support that soccer clubs do? What role could public relations play in changing attitudes and behaviour towards cricket generally? Such questions and others led to this particular research interest.

Cricket at all levels of the game has received a great deal of criticism in recent years for an apparent inability, even reluctance, to take the requisite steps towards adapting to changing market demands. The sport has also suffered from a serious image problem. One of the aims of this study was to attempt to discover the reasons for such negative associations through both primary and secondary research. It was clear that the only way to get a realistic
snapshot of actual prevailing attitudes and practices in cricket was through making personal
contact with people involved in the sport. Arrangements were made to interview a wide range
of personnel who were associated with cricket in differing capacities, as this would give a
broad but representative range of perspectives and views of the game. The following people
were all interviewed during the primary research phase of the project and the information they
supplied forms the core of the study: Andrew Walpole, Media Manager for the England
Cricket Team at the England and Wales Cricket Board; James Bailey, Marketing Manager,
Durham County Cricket Club; Vicky Laverick, Public Relations and Marketing Executive,
Durham County Cricket Club; Liz Sutcliffe, Marketing and Sponsorship Manager, Yorkshire
County Cricket Club; Andrew Pratt, First Team Wicket Keeper, Durham County Cricket
Club; Paul Grayson, Senior Player and Professional Cricketers Association Representative for
Essex County Cricket Club and England One Day International player; Richard Nowell of
Karen Earl Sponsorship Limited; Brian Hunt, Honorary Statistician and First Team Scorer,
Durham County Cricket Club; Paul Farbrace, England Youth Teams Manager and specialist
Wicket Keeping Coach at the England and Wales Cricket Board. A limitation to the research
was that it was not possible to get a balance of player’s views from both clubs in the study as
an interview with a player from Yorkshire CCC could not be organised. Instead, Paul Gray-
son, who began his playing career with Yorkshire CCC before moving to Essex CCC agreed
to be interviewed which redressed the balance somewhat. Informal talks with coaches and
others associated with professional cricket also provided useful material that has been incor-
porated into the study.

In selecting individuals to be interviewed a purposive sample was identified and
agreed. Visits were made to Durham and Yorkshire CCC headquarters at the Riverside in
Chester-le-Street and Headingley in order to conduct personal, face-to-face interviews. Other
interviews were conducted over the telephone as this was more convenient for all the partici-
pants. The personal, face-to-face interviews were designed to be semi-structured and open-ended as it was felt that this approach would generate a more detailed response and would put interviewees more at ease. Interviewees were sent the questions via email in advance of the interviews and were given the opportunity to decline answering specific questions if required. This did not happen and no question had to be changed or deleted. Each of the personal interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of all interviewees and notes were made during the telephone interviews. All interviews were transcribed and analysed in detail in order to develop and produce a ‘thick description’ which has been useful in establishing the quality of the research. The main advantages of such interviews were that the researcher was able to control the line of questioning and tailor it specifically to the study whilst gathering important information from the interviewee.

Secondary research took the form of consulting a variety of literature sources namely key texts and journals and other print material. A range of significant key scholarly texts were identified, the majority of which deal with sports from a social science perspective. An extensive preliminary literature search suggested that texts dealing specifically with cricket were few. Most general sports texts tend to have short, though significant, pieces on cricket. The greater majority of cricket related writing tended to focus on the history and development of the sport or were specifically about cricket clubs or players. A particularly interesting issue is that of cultural identity and its impact and influence on cricket and its supporters. This is an issue which has created much academic interest but with specific focus on soccer. One aim of this study was to take and apply some of these key theories usefully to cricket.

An extensive range of print media, particularly newspapers and special interest magazines were also used. New media such as online information sources also provided relevant material. Both Durham and Yorkshire have websites as do the ECB and ICC. CricInfo, a
website dedicated to the sport, has an extensive article archive and useful links to a range of alternative information sources which have proved helpful.

In addition, public relations literature and theoretical material was also consulted and applied to the research. Specific elements of public relations theory were appropriate to this study. For example, in determining the extent and application of public relations activity conducted by the two clubs, reference is made to the public relations planning process, communication models and theories, stakeholder and publics theories and image and identity theories. At no time did it become necessary to adapt or alter the research methodology as the research progressed. As the basic methodology was sound, reliable and achievable, the quality of the research and its outcomes were in no way or at any stage compromised or threatened.

Results

A key factor to emerge from the research is that public relations is extremely important at Durham County Cricket Club. Vicky Laverick, the club’s Public Relations and Marketing Executive, is the personification of the club’s commitment to this element of their marketing and promotion strategy as prior to Vicky’s engagement the post did not exist. Durham CCC’s approach to public relations is the exception rather than the rule amongst the eighteen First Class Counties. Vicky is one of only a very few dedicated public relations personnel which is indicative of the widespread disregard for public relations in domestic cricket. Marketing is very much a feature of all the County Clubs and each club has a marketing manager or the equivalent, but public relations tends to be incorporated into the marketing activities rather than being used as a communications tool in its own right. From the research conducted at Durham it is evident that even here, where there is a keenly proactive approach to public relations, such activity is not always considered to be a priority and there is a constant struggle for budgets and resources. This apparent neglect of public relations is a risky strat-
The greatest barrier to implementing public relations strategies in cricket is lack of finance. Although the ECB is financially secure, the Counties are reliant on the ECB for funding. However, in order to survive, the clubs have to generate their own income, and largely depending on location and relationships with key publics and stakeholders, some Counties are more financially secure than others. There appears to be a case to answer here that the ECB needs to redress the balance somewhat and allocate specific resources for public relations activity. It is suggested that if cricket was treated more like a business, the ECB could adopt the role of “head office” in overseeing the activities and performances of the “branch offices”. More of a corporate approach to public relations would assist greatly in ensuring a better corporate image and identity for the game. This would allow the Counties to continue promoting their regional identity but under the England and Wales Cricket Board corporate umbrella.

It is evident that there is currently a distance between the ECB and the Counties. Any marketing and public relations activity have to be cleared with the ECB before implementation but visits to the Counties by their governing body are rare. It is also evident that the ECB seems to focus much more on the England national team than on the Counties. This skewed balance was particularly noticeable during the early part of 2003, as very little information had been made available about the new Twenty20 tournament, which was widely regarded amongst players and officials alike, as a resuscitation strategy for the sport. The tournament, which had its inaugural games in June had, during the writing up of the research, yet to be fully marketed. According to Paul Grayson this was a tactical mistake. In his opinion public relations is vital to the long-term survival of the game of cricket and he cited this particular issue as an example of a typical but disappointing failure to act proactively. This view was further repeated by both James Bailey and Andrew Pratt from Durham, who both held the
view that the time to be disseminating the message to the publics was already at hand but that it was unable to happen because the ECB was still engaged in research and development and a sponsor has not been secured. However, the political wrangles in which cricket had reluctantly become involved at the World Cup rather overshadowed the development of the domestic game, another factor, perhaps, in the argument that ECB focus tends to be directed towards the national team. It is, however, encouraging for public relations practice to discover that much greater use of public relations at County level features as a significant element of the ECB’s long-term strategy for the game:

Durham CCC allocates part of the marketing budget for public relations activities because of a perceived need and because the Chairman, Bill Midgley and the Chief Executive, David Harker are active, high profile spokespeople for the Club with personal involvement with a range of key publics and stakeholders. This proactive approach, which is actively encouraged throughout the Club, is being observed with great interest by many involved with the sports promotion. The reality is that much more in terms of practical public relations needs to be done but certain limitations are imposed which have long term implications for the survival of both the club and the game. The Club’s policy of nurturing local young cricketers by developing them through the Durham academy before they graduate into the First and Second teams is a key element of the club’s public relations strategy and one that is well-regarded by the club’s supporters and members. Of the twenty 2003 playing staff, fourteen are from the North East and have been playing together, according to Andrew Pratt, since the age of thirteen. Durham CCC’s attitude to player development is a key strength in that it extends throughout the Club from its programme of coaching youth cricket in the region’s schools, through the Durham Schools Cricket Association which has county representative teams in all age groups from Under 11 to Under 16 as well as women’s teams, into the Academy and First teams. The County youth teams receive coaching from the academy coaches
and players and specialist coaching is offered to young elite players. Players of all ages are valued and made to feel part of the Club which is a key element in developing player loyalty.

The resource issue in regard to public relations at Durham CCC needs to be monitored with a view to ensuring that financial backing is put into place to optimise the communications efforts. This is clearly something that does not seem to be widely recognised in the modern game. The following comment by James Bailey illustrates this very clearly: “Cricket is such a break even business. One of the main reasons that First Class Counties don’t have any PR or even marketing is that it doesn’t add to your bottom line immediately. They’ll concentrate on selling sponsorship or corporate hospitality, which has a big impact. Durham is a break even business but we’re very much focussed on the long-term.” The same theme is identified by Vicky Laverick: “There’s so much we could do here really, it’s just having the resources to do it. We don’t have resources to measure the effectiveness of articles printed in particular magazines. If we can’t evaluate it, it makes you wonder whether its worth it. We don’t have resources to pay media clippings agencies to scan every publication.” The role that public relations has to play in the overall promotion of cricket and specifically Durham CCC, cannot be overemphasised. Since its inception as a First Class County, Durham CCC has relied heavily on the support of the local spectators and businesses and readily admits that without such stakeholder support, the club will be unable to survive as a going concern.

Of all the First Class County cricket clubs in the United Kingdom, Yorkshire CCC is the club that many would agree, supporters and non-supporters alike, is the most traditional and well-known. Yorkshire CCC is one of the very few sporting institutions which is recognisable to a wide audience, many of whom are not in the slightest bit interested in cricket. In fact, Yorkshire CCC, until very recently, was synonymous with cricket, meaning that both “cricket” the word and cricket the sport were inextricably linked with the Club and the word “Yorkshire” could even be extended as a connotation for the sport. The whole Yorkshire ap-
approach to cricket has become legendary. Much of what has been written on that subject to-gether with stories that have grown around some of the famous players through the years has created a mythology about the Club. A key feature of Yorkshire CCC is the fact that it has successfully positioned itself as a corporate brand, something that many of its competitors have still to achieve. An issue worth analysing, however, is how relevant is Yorkshire CCC’s mirror image to contemporary cricket and how does this image match the existing actual image?

Yorkshire CCC, unlike Durham CCC, does not have a dedicated public relations professional on the marketing team. In her role as Marketing and Sponsorship Manager, Liz Sutcliffe describes public relations activity as being important but it is not given specific financial resources. The approach to marketing communications at Yorkshire CCC appears to be very successfully integrated and, like Durham CCC, the income generating focus is not exclusively on cricket. Though there is clearly a place for public relations, other techniques, which are clearly not aimed at the grass roots supporter, seem to be more important at Yorkshire. This is a clear example, which seems to be very common in domestic cricket, of public relations being subsumed or even overlooked in favour of other organisational functions and activities which are perceived as being more lucrative and cost effective. For example, as a method of generating club loyalty and as a lucrative income stream, 2003 has seen a concerted push of hospitality packages which are being promoted using carefully targeted personal appeals. Although hospitality packages are thoughtfully targeted at corporate client publics, which have the potential to be very lucrative, there is a tangible sense that, for the long-term survival of both the Club and the game, it is the younger publics that need better targeting. This is something that is relatively new at Yorkshire CCC, the acceptance that if a younger public is targeted, they can potentially be tied into the Club for a long time. As with the many other First Class Counties, Yorkshire CCC is having to compete for support with
local premier league soccer clubs and the recognition that young supporters are much more likely to be attracted to a shorter and more dynamic game is something that the Clubs are having to face up to and accept. With the advent of the Twenty20 Cup, Yorkshire CCC are, like Durham CCC, hoping that this will be product that will fill the gap in the market.

One particularly noticeable characteristic of Yorkshire CCC is that there seems to be a tendency to internalise problems and issues which, in terms of reputation management, is ill-advised. As Hutton et al state, reputation management, if it is to emerge as a significant business function, clearly rests on a foundation of what is traditionally termed “public relations”. The fact that the Club does not have a dedicated public relations function yet seems apparently content to rely on history, tradition and, perhaps mythology, to assuage potentially damaging image and reputation issues suggests a possible lack of understanding concerning reputation management. It became apparent during the interview with Liz Sutcliffe that current efforts at Yorkshire CCC are more concerned with trying to encourage greater numbers of spectators through the gates for the forthcoming season.

The overwhelming justification for developing a proactive approach to public relations and reputation management is found in Hutton et al’s findings that a good reputation is fundamental to any organisation’s success. It is evident from the research at both Durham and Yorkshire that cricket clubs, which depend upon continual replenishment of supporters for their long-term viability, need to be especially mindful of the implications of ignoring the basic principles of public relations.

Discussion/Conclusion

Recent research into the operation of professional English cricket is unanimous on one particularly incontrovertible issue which is that the modern game is strategically vulnerable. In 1997, Shibli and Wilkinson-Riddle, amongst others, detailed a number of observations about the financial strength of the First Class counties which was based upon published ac-
counts for the year ended 1995. Despite a number of radical changes being made at every level of the game since the late 1990s, such as the introduction of the 10-match triangular NatWest Series between the national and visiting teams, the central contracting of England players, the introduction of a two-division promotion and relegation competition for both the County Championship and the one-day National Cricket League and day/night matches, at the game’s highest levels, the focus must continue to be on making cricket accessible to a wider audience.

In order to consider how the game can move forward, it is necessary to review a number of observations concerning the financial strength of the 18 First Class County clubs. From research conducted by Shibli and Wilkinson-Riddle it is apparent that a significant amount of gross income is generated by commercial activities but this falls far below the amount needed to pay for the core activity leading to an unsatisfactory situation for all the clubs where “the commercial income shows static profitability, a high degree of volatility and therefore inherent unreliability. With only 34% of gross revenue coming from the England and Wales Cricket Board, lucrative additional income streams are therefore essential to the survival of the county clubs. Shibli and Wilkinson-Riddle’s research suggests that cricket’s current financial difficulties are a direct consequence of a number of microenvironmental factors. Most significant amongst these are that county cricket continues to rely upon grant income from the ECB, County Championship matches have not generated enough support from the public, member subscriptions are falling year on year and commercial income is unlikely to grow sufficiently to present clubs with the necessary financial support. Findings such as these point to the anachronistic nature of cricket management and illustrate the persistent problematic financial situation peculiar to a sport in which most clubs operate at a loss and are, in fact subsidised by cricket followers. Unlike soccer club directors who embrace such initiatives as share flotations as a way of attempting to raise revenue, cricket clubs have
historically relied upon membership fees, gate-receipts and “general fund-raising rituals, such as bazaars, to keep their club functioning.

The apparent reluctance by those at the sport’s highest levels to regard cricket as a business has its roots in the very origins of the modern game. The fact that it took more than 130 years to change the County Championship to a two-division, more competitive tournament is yet a further illustration of the resistance to change that continues to permeate the sport. It is however, undoubtedly the case that these powerful influences persist and that they regularly provide the ammunition with which to launch, albeit sometimes ill informed, attacks. It is this persistent and unfortunate image of the game that presents it with perhaps the most pressing public relations challenge of all, that is to create an image that is appealing and relevant to today’s more demanding and sophisticated audiences. An emergent fact from the primary research is that although the modern game is proving to be more attractive to audiences with a different demographic to the traditional cricket audience, much more needs to be done. All the players and coaches interviewed were unanimous in supporting the notion of getting close to the people who really matter and giving them more of what they really want to see a view which was further endorsed by Nicky Peng of Durham CCC who said: “Crowds want to see big shots and action, we need to encourage people to come and watch. You can see by the Norwich Union League how much the people love it; with coloured clothing and floodlights, it brings a different dimension to cricket.” The ECB’s recent own market research found that “Some groups of consumers felt that there was a lack of buzz and excitement associated with cricket compared to other sports, particularly with the county game. Younger and potentially new cricket audiences made clear that they wanted forms of entertainment with enough excitement to justify the leisure time and money they would invest in purchasing a match ticket.” There is clearly a recognition that cricket must continue in its at-
tempts to become much more consumer focussed and that a systematic public relations orientation can help in achieving that objective.

A dominant phrase in the lexicon of contemporary public relations and marketing communications is “relationship building”. Public relations practice, historically has been directed towards managing communications. However, within the last five years, academics have begun to conceptualise the practice of public relations as relationship management, and research has become centred on critically examining the range of variables that impinge upon organisation-public relationships. The findings of such research continually show that effectively managed organisation-public relationships affect key public member attitudes, evaluations and behaviours. Actual recent research conducted by Bruning and also Hutton et al though not applied to cricket club publics, is nonetheless relevant. The fundamental tenet of such research is that publics will display long-term loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour to a company, brand or service if a relationally-based grounding is applied to organisational public relations practice. This theory of relationship building is completely consistent with Grunig’s Two-way Symmetric Model of Public Relations which is characterised as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Mutual understanding</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of Communication</td>
<td>Two-way; balanced effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Model</td>
<td>Group ← symmetrically ↔ Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of Research</td>
<td>Formative; evaluative of understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading Historical Figures</td>
<td>Bernays, educators, professional leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where Practiced Today</td>
<td>Regulated business, agencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Estimated Percentage of Organisations Practicing Today</td>
<td>15% (including Durham County Cricket Club)</td>
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**Characteristics of the Two-Way Symmetric Public Relations Model**

The research findings for this dissertation indicate that this model is evident in the communication strategies of both Durham and Yorkshire CCCs but that Durham is more pro-
active in creating two-way symmetric communication strategies than Yorkshire. The obvious implication of such findings is that there is need for trained public relations practitioners at all First Class County Clubs.

Hutton et al state that relationships are of significant importance and relevance to people who are direct stakeholders of the organisation such as employees, customers, stockholders and others who usually are the organisation’s most important publics. They also make the interesting observation that: a reputation is generally something an organisation has with strangers, but a relationship is generally something an organisation has with its friends and associates. The relevance of these findings to cricket clubs and the sport in general is clear. Creating the correct image for both the sport and clubs is necessary and essential as this will develop the reputation that in turn forms the alchemy which turns strangers into long-term friends and associates. The primary research conducted for this dissertation underpins this theory and is encapsulated in Vicky Laverick of Durham CCC’s view that: “Your company reputation and image is what it’s all about and if you don’t have that, it doesn’t matter how good your product is, if people think it’s rubbish but it’s not, there isn’t much you can do about it so you really have to manage your reputation.” Proactive relationship building strategies present an achievable critical success factor for cricket. According to Richard Nowell: “Relationship building with all key publics is critical but it is vitally essential to forge relationships with children. The role of the sponsor is to get things for the kids to do, it (cricket) needs to take itself to the public a lot more.”

This section began with the notion that for publics to become more widely engaged with cricket, it is necessary for those involved in the game, whether administrators, players, or the media, to communicate all that is desirable about the sport and its teams frequently and consistently. This goes to the very heart of the human communication theories which form the foundations of modern public relations. It is argued here that an acknowledgement and
awareness, at least, of the influence of particular communication theories can only assist in the construction of highly effective public relations strategies for cricket clubs. Two specific and accessible communication theories worth discussing in this context are the theories of social penetration and social exchange. Social penetration theory, as originally developed by Altman and Taylor and analysed by Heath and Bryant is completely relevant to public relations in cricket quite simply because social penetration refers to the process whereby people come to know one another in varying degrees of detail and intimacy. This theory views the quality of communication – what is exchanged between relational partners – as vital to the development and maintenance of relationships, positive communication produces positive relationships, whereas negative communication results in negative ones. One of the keys to relationship development is what the participants remember about previous encounters with one another. Memorable and positive experiences are critical to all relationship building founded on social penetration theory. Here, the metaphor of “penetration” helps in explaining the idea that cricket clubs-publics relationships can be developed on the basis of “getting into” and, by association, getting to know each other in order to achieve the mutual understanding of two-way symmetric public relations.

In order for cricket clubs to further nurture lucrative relationships of the kind that have the potential to “draw in” future generations of supporters, an understanding of social exchange theory is necessary: According to social exchange theory, individuals (publics), who are involved in interactions that they want to be positive, define and negotiate what they consider to be required for positive and negative communication, and “agree “ on the rules and behaviours required to foster the relationship. Heath and Bryant state that interpersonal communication is a symbolic process by which two people are bound together in a relationship, provide each other with resources or negotiate the exchange of resources. This theory, then, sits at the very heart of public relations practice.
A conclusion to be drawn from the aforementioned theories is that many of the relationship building strategies, which are fundamental to human interpersonal communication, can be perfectly adapted to cricket club-publics relationships. Toth\textsuperscript{2}, who also recommends and endorses the use of interpersonal communication processes as part of all organisation-public relationship building, supports this assertion. It is undoubtedly the case that both key public members and the cricket club will benefit when public relations activities are managed utilising relational perspectives. It is also extremely likely that when publics are able to feel as though they have a relationship with their club, the halo effect will occur whereby the overall image of cricket as a sport will be greatly improved.

By applying Grunig’s situational theory of publics to the concept of relationship management it is evident that cricket clubs, through a better understanding of how their publics operate, will be able to devise much more effective communications strategies. Organisations need to establish relationships with their publics and publics seek to establish relationships with their chosen organisation for reasons of mutual benefit. Most publics, which include stakeholder publics such as, in the context of both Yorkshire and Durham CCCs, members, players, spectators and the local community are passive. Mutual interest and acknowledgement exists but for the greater part of the relationship, publics and organisation are content to function without significant formal communication. However, it is imperative that in order to maintain positive relationships, the organisation does not take these publics for granted or overlook them when communication becomes a necessity. Both Yorkshire and Durham CCCs have commented upon falling membership numbers and low gate numbers at matches, particularly the County Championship games. A key finding of the primary research for this study is that there is clear evidence that certain key stakeholder publics in cricket have been allowed to become active – they are actively demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the clubs.

\textsuperscript{2} in Ledingham and Bruning PR as Relationship Management (p.205)
or the sport in general by not buying into the game. This has clear implications for cricket’s future and is an issue that needs to be addressed at the sport’s highest levels.

“As for the future of the game, some very tough decisions need to be made. Cricket is in the entertainment business and has to take its customers very seriously. . . . What does cricket need to do to change people’s perception that it is merely a game rooted in the past and no longer relevant to today’s helter-skelter society?”

The above statement which appeared in the February/March 2003 edition of the Cricket Society Bulletin, is an excellent summation of the current state of English cricket. The extensive media coverage of the Cricket World Cup has undoubtedly raised awareness and created interest in and discussion about the game that should be welcomed by all its constituent parties. One of James Bailey’s key stated objectives for the game has been met - cricket has been moved from the back pages to not only the lifestyle pages of many publications, but also the front page. It would seem that now is the time to capitalise on people’s awareness and to take the opportunity to keep cricket in the public eye.

This heightened awareness of cricket has resulted in some recent important announcements surrounding the game. On 12th March 2003, npower announced its sponsorship of the new Twenty20 Cup. The Durham County Cricket Club website welcomed this announcement with the comment that “We are excited by what the ECB is doing to broaden the appeal of cricket”. This is an example of a significant third party endorsement for cricket the product as npower is already extensively involved with the sport. It is especially significant because in 2002, it became the first Test sponsor to actively marketing matches to families and children, with designated npower ‘Lion’s Den’ areas at the games. This project introduced over 6,500 children to Test cricket.

It is apparent from the research findings that the Twenty20 Cup is regarded as cricket’s potential saviour. Everyone consulted during the course of this research were
unanimous in their opinion that cricket has to change and that by creating a shortened fast-paced version of the traditional one-day game that will last just two hours and 45 minutes and be played under floodlights and in coloured clothing new publics will be reached and drawn into the game. The Twenty20 Cup is the result of the ECB’s own market research which has proved to be an invaluable tool in helping to develop a more consumer focused approach to cricket. The ECB anticipates that this venture will yield long-term benefits that will help the game within England and Wales to become stronger at all levels both professional and amateur. Changing the structure of a game which to many is outdated and irrelevant is an important first step, but it is clear that much more can be done at club level in developing and maintaining satisfying long-term relationships with a range of existing and intensely loyal publics and the new publics which will be created by the new tournament. A systematic commitment to proactive public relations is undoubtedly the key. A management commitment to ensuring that the function is professionally applied and resourced will be rewarded by the extensive long-term benefits that are the result of establishing and implementing the symmetric public relations model.

It is evident from the research that those involved in the game recognise the need for and actively encourage what Peters and Waterman refer to as “Staying close to the customer.” This is an example of the active symmetrical communication which is practised extensively in what Peters and Waterman termed “Excellent Organisations”. Grunig says that it is only a small leap in logic to conclude that excellent organisations should have an excellent public relations function to manage this symmetrical communication. Durham CCC with its existing commitment to public relations is well on the way to achieving excellence. If public relations is allowed a greater strategic role at the Club there is real potential here for Durham to enjoy a competitive advantage that will affirm its position as an innovative market leader in the sport. As Richard Nowell from Karen Earl Sponsorship Limited observes: “Durham CC
brings innovation to the game in terms of what they are doing as far as PR and marketing are concerned. Many other cricket clubs (including First Class Counties) don’t do PR and I feel that this is a big mistake.”

Players should be used much more strategically for public relations purposes. Youngsters are attracted to the sport because they want to emulate and get close to the players that they admire. Cricket has the advantage of being much more accessible than other sports like soccer and identifying and training playing staff to coach young players and making players available on match days to sign autographs and play in the nets is a cost effective way approach to relationship management. In Richard Nowell’s opinion: “Players need to understand their role as ambassadors – they need to be consumer friendly. Cricketers have short contracts and are only tied to the county for a few months – building goodwill is important to ensure that players will engage with PR effort. On a local level, you need to get involved with local people. The counties don’t have any money so players need to be worked harder in terms of PR. Get players to talk to the media as a way of generating loads of free advertising. Players need media training. Take players to the publics, make them human, get people to relate to them – cricket needs a David Beckham”.

Essex CCC’s Paul Grayson endorses this view. He feels that it is incumbent on all senior cricket players to engage in “active public relations” and thinks it should be a compulsory part of an international player’s training, at all ages and levels. Andrew Pratt refers to situations where players have felt disadvantaged because they did not have the requisite communications skills training and though “you have to learn from experience” he feels that players are under utilised in public relations terms because they do not have the relevant training and expertise. It is clear, therefore, that the Clubs have the potential to derive significant benefits if they develop their players as public relations tools, which means that they also need to invest players with the skills to become confident media spokespeople: “Cricket has
to work a lot harder to get column inches. Counties are very wary of the media but it’s impor-
tant to give local journalists access to the players. Get to know the media a lot more, build
relationships”. Durham use their players for PR – the more interviews players do, the better
the club’s relationship with the media. Relationship building with media is critical. ECB
need to train more players to become media savvy.”

Both the cricket clubs and cricket in general must be thoroughly aware of who their
publics are and be able to categorise them in accordance with Grunig’s typology of publics.
Reference has been made to the fact that, perhaps as a result of lack of awareness or under-
standing of publics behaviour, key stakeholder publics in cricket have changed from being
passive to active, a situation which needs to be addressed and reversed. Acknowledging the
existence of active publics in cricket has to be a priority for both the policy makers at the
highest levels of the domestic game and the senior CEOs at the cricket clubs. It is imperative,
for the future well being of both the clubs and cricket generally that strategies are set in place
which allow for both the continual monitoring of publics and the organic adaptation of the
organisation. This can be achieved by the installation of public relations personnel who, by
virtue of their profession, perform what organisational theorists call a “boundary” role.

Marketing and promotions are evidently the functions with which the clubs and the
sport are most comfortable. The perhaps rather reluctant acceptance that cricket is a business
and thus needs to operate as one is manifest in the promotional strategies in place at both
Durham and Yorkshire CCCs. However, in response to Richard Nowell’s view that “Cricket
needs to take itself to the public a lot more a final observation needs close attention. In their
research into public relations and marketing practices Ehling, White and Grunig found that
both marketing and public relations are important functions for any organisation. However,
when public relations was subsumed into marketing, as tends to be the case in the cricket

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3 Excellence in PR and Comms Management p.390
clubs, organisations were deprived of one of those two critical functions. It is therefore rec-
ognised that if the public relations function is to derive its optimum capabilities and benefits,
public relations departments must exist separately from marketing departments, or if that is
not viable then the two functions must be conceptually and operationally distinct within the
same department.

The case for public relations in cricket has been made. The 2003 season saw the most
significant structural changes to the domestic game for many years. It seems appropriate,
therefore, that the extensive innovations which are beginning to be seen on the field of play,
are underpinned and optimised by similar innovations in the boardroom. Maximising the ob-
vious potential and benefits of public relations has to be done now in order to secure the fu-
ture of the modern game.
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**International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship**

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