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It's Football But Not As You Know It – Using Public Relations To Promote The World Game in Australia

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Introduction
Public relations is arguably the least understood and most under-utilised of all the tools available to contemporary sports business. L’Etang (2006) observes that though public relations concerns and activities are touched upon by authors from sports management, sports marketing, sports journalism, events management and sports media sociology, scant reference is made to public relations concepts. For a variety of reasons, mainly concerned with ignorance and lack of understanding, public relations is also the marketing communications discipline which attracts the greatest criticism and negative opinion. However, because of its unique characteristics, public relations, when it is implemented knowledgeably and strategically, can exert a significant influence in sports marketing communications (Hopwood 2007).ii

For a sport trying to establish its credibility and create support and interest in an already intensely competitive and sometimes hostile environment, the challenge to engage hearts and minds can be great. This is exactly the situation in which professional soccer and Queensland Roar Football Club have found themselves since the regeneration of the round ball version of football started in Australia 2005. This article will explore, making reference to ongoing work being undertaken with Queensland Roar Football Club how developing a thorough understanding and appreciation of the public relations function can bring enormous benefits to sports organizations.

Sports organizations today have to compete operationally on the global stage in terms of attracting and maintaining loyalty amongst constituent stakeholders (at all levels) which include, for example, customers, consumers, sponsors and the media as well as sports practitioners (e.g. athletes and coaches) themselves. However, the licence to operate for sports organizations is increasingly having to be earned and gained in the face of all kinds of alternative offerings and attractions (not all of them sports orientated) which means that the business of sport is becoming ever more challenging for those who choose to participate whether as a practitioner or administrator. From a sports marketing perspective, a significant part of this challenge must be for all these sports stakeholders and stake seekers to appreciate and understand that public relations as an element of the strategic sports business communication mix can achieve long term goals and objectives which are above and beyond those of purely marketing. In today’s competitive business environment, sports organizations
simply will not survive if they do not develop meaningful relationships with their many and diverse publics – all of whom, regardless of the sport, are influential at some level or other.

These days no organization can choose not to do public relations and for sports organizations a better understanding of the benefits of professional public relations can be an extremely cost effective way of engaging with their full range of diverse publics and stakeholders. Recent published research conducted amongst a range of organization types consistently shows that the value of public relations comes from the relationships that organizations develop and maintain with publics (Grunig et al 2006)\textsuperscript{iii}. The creation and development of long term relationship management and public relations strategies offer an extensive range of measurable competitive advantage benefits which are beginning to be realised by countless organizations and which are frequently above and beyond the bottom line. However, it is often the case that sports organizations are yet to be convinced of the benefits of using public relations, mainly because true expertise in public relations is rarely evident and because such organizations adopt a predominantly marketing focused approach which overlooks the unique characteristics of public relations. Public relations is much more than simply media relations, publicity and event management, it is a fundamental component of today’s integrated marketing communications mix. Definitions of the discipline are many but according to Cutlip et al (2006)\textsuperscript{iv} public relations is “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.” Contextualising this interpretation in sport, Stoldt et al (2006)\textsuperscript{v} define sports public relations as “a managerial communication-based function designed to identify a sport organization’s key publics, evaluate its relationships with those publics, and foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those publics.” The important word for sports organizations in both these definitions is ‘relationships’ as it relates to the relationship management notion that any organization with effective public relations will attain positive public relationships.

**Soccer in Australia and Queensland Roar Football Club**

As a spectator sport soccer has a huge global following which is both well documented and evidenced by the huge amounts of money and interest which are expended on the sport annually. It is almost inconceivable to think, therefore, that people might actually need to be persuaded that it is a sport worth watching and following as a supporter. In Australia, however, things are very different. Though soccer has a long history, having been played competitively in Australia since 1880, it has been beset by huge challenges in its bid to establish its credibility as a viable alternative to the traditionally more “macho” Australian pastimes of Australian Rules Football (AFL), Rugby League (NRL) and Rugby Union (Rugby). The once frequently voiced assertion that “Only sheilas, wogs and poofters played soccer” (Warren et al, 2002)\textsuperscript{vi} is a fairly typical view and it is within this uniquely challenging context that the eight Hyundai ‘A’-League teams are attempting to win the hearts and minds of a
whole new supporter base. In August 2007 professional soccer begins its much anticipated third season since the revamped Football Federation of Australia (FFA) created the A-League domestic tournament in 2005. Building relationships in order to create and nurture a new fan base for each of the current eight ‘A’ league teams is a fundamental feature of this new found football optimism. Queensland Roar Football Club is one of these eight teams and this article gives an insight into how, by incorporating a professional public relations approach to their strategic business planning and by developing Ledingham’s (2006) idea that the effective management of organizational relationships around common interests and shared goals results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics, it is possible to win hearts and minds and create a new following for football in Queensland specifically and Australia generally.

Queensland Roar Football Club (hereafter QRFC) has been in existence in its current form since 2nd March 2005. In terms of the development of professional football in Australia it is a young club which, together with the other ‘A’ league clubs, completed its second season in January 2007. In a country where round ball football is not the most popular sport, QRFC has many mountains to climb but its stated objectives include the following:

- QRFC aims to encourage more people to become involved in football whether through playing or watching the game:

- To act as the state’s football representative in the community – forging links with community, school and other organizations in order to improve and maintain interest in the game and the clubs standing in the community;

- Encourage women, disabled people and people from all ethnic backgrounds to become involved in the game of football; and ultimately

- To be an agent of change in sport, health and the environment in the local community

These objectives are common to sports organizations, regardless of the sport or whether or not the sport organization holds amateur or professional status. Each of these objectives can, it is suggested, best be achieved through public relations as they are all associated with educating, informing and relationship building and they are all long term and not necessarily directed towards the bottom line. Why then, did the senior executives at QRFC feel that they could be achieved solely through marketing strategies? The reason given was that, by their own admission, they did not understand how public relations could help - asking the question: “Isn’t public relations just about getting publicity and the media on our side so that if something goes wrong or we have some kind of crisis, they’ll support us?”
Primary research conducted via an intercept survey at the last game of the 2006/2007 season by students at Bond University in Queensland for QRFC highlighted a number of key areas in which spectators and supporters perceived QRFC specifically, and football in Australia more generally, to be deficient:

- Not really knowing their supporters
- Inactively contributing to the community
- Not getting youngsters sufficiently interested and involved with football, lack of involvement at grassroots level
- Lack of encouragement and incentives for supporters to become members and/or season ticket holders
- Not being proactive and visible in terms of social responsibility
- Not working hard enough to broaden the appeal of football generally and capitalising on the success of the national team – the Socceroos
- Not yet having a major shirt sponsor on board
- Not working hard enough to create a great up to date website and develop excellent customer relationship management strategies.

These frequently recurring findings both confirmed and added to what the senior executives at the club knew or thought and helped create the understanding that concentrating solely on a purely marketing oriented strategy was not going to address or provide the long term solution to such issues. It was therefore recommended that QRFC develop a proactive public relations strategy, firmly grounded in the principles of relationship management, to add to their strategic armoury for 2007/2008 and beyond.

**Relationship Management in Sport: the role of professional Public Relations**

Relationship management or the relational approach is an emerging paradigm which has been applied to various public relations functions such as issues management, crisis management, community relations, media relations and public affairs. The whole notion and philosophy of relationship management is entirely consistent with other recognised major concepts of key relevance to public relations such as social exchange theory, systems theory and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984)^x^ and is appropriate to other theories in the public relations domain such as that of public loyalty developed by Ledingham and Bruning (1997)^x^x^. This continuing project with QRFC represents one of the very few times the relational approach has been applied to sport but as demonstrated by its grounding in the theories mentioned above, its relevance is beyond doubt.
According to Ledingham (2006) the desired outcome of effective organization-public relationship management is mutual understanding and benefit. He states that the relationship perspective of public relations suggests that balancing the interests of organizations and publics is achieved through management of organization-public relationships. Many of the significant relationships that QRFC and any sport organization are seeking to develop are potentially life-long which means that the concept of loyalty becomes important. The publics of sports organizations traditionally have a powerful sense of loyalty which must be earned, nurtured and respected, cannot be bought and which must not be taken for granted. Recent research regarding the relationship between organizations and significant publics highlights these findings which are of key importance to QRFC in the long term achievement of their organizational objectives:

1. To be effective and sustaining, relationships need to be seen as mutually beneficial, based on mutual interest between an organization and its significant publics.
2. The key to managing successful organizational-public relationships is to understand what must be done in order to initiate, develop and maintain that relationship.
3. Successful relationship management programmes focus on these 5 core dimensions:
   - Trust
   - Openness
   - Involvement
   - Investment
   - Commitment
4. The result of a successfully managed organizational-public relationship can be measured in terms of the degree to which significant publics express loyalty to an organization.

By understanding, adopting and applying these principles of public relations management to their strategic business planning, QRFC are starting the 2007/2008 season with a noticeably different philosophy. With a revamped identity-focussed, continuously updated, informative, user friendly and fan-oriented website, increased community and school involvement, synergistic relationships with Multicultural Affairs Queensland for social responsibility issues such as Roar Against Racism and a clearly emerging public relations orientation, QRFC are making significant changes. What the publics think about this new relationship focussed approach will become clear as research with the club continues throughout the season.

**Conclusion**

Thus it is suggested that from a sports marketing and business perspective adopting a relationship management orientation can directly contribute to the overall marketing and communications objectives of a sports organization. The challenges and demands faced by today's sports industry mean that for any organization committed to achieving excellence in
the business of sport, an understanding of the critical role that public relations can play within
the context of sport management in both amateur and professional sports is becoming
increasingly essential. Relationship management is the essence of public relations as it
reflects the principles which lie at the heart of the widely used definitions of public relations.
Given the nature of the relationships sports organizations strive to nurture with their wide
ranging publics, it seems highly appropriate that public relations should play a significant part
in their establishment and maintenance. Beginning to appreciate those relationships and
understand the true potential of public relations is a lesson being learned by Queensland
Roar and one which is of intense value to all sports.

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