NBA Cares a Case Analysis
Introduction to Public Relations
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Background

The NBA has gotten some bad press because of the irresponsible actions of some of the league's players. From 2003 through 2004 Kobe Bryant name was in the news because of his infamous sex scandal where a 19 year old hotel worker accused him of raping her. However she later refused to testify at the trial and the prosecuting attorneys dropped the case. Two months later in November of 2004 the worst fight ever seen in the history of the NBA broke out at the Piston-Pacers game. Several Pacers players including Ron Artest got into fistfights with the Piston fans. The NBA definitely needed some help with its image and the image of its players. The NBA Cares campaign came out a year later. The campaign's mission is to demonstrate leadership in social responsibility, reach communities through philanthropy, hands-on service and legacy projects. The campaign’s mission implies that the NBA wants to change the image of the players from socially irresponsible to responsible caring members of a community. This approach can be seen through all of the campaign’s tactics. News articles feature basketball players flying to remote parts of the world teaching underprivileged children how to play basketball, and YouTube videos feature superstars talking about how basketball is more than just a game and that it teaches unity, work ethic and love.

The NBA Cares campaign uses many different strategies, channels and tactics. However the campaign has a few main focuses. One of these is the “NBA Fit” initiative. Different NBA stars host fitness camps and educate members of the community on how to be healthy and get in shape. Another focus is the “NBA Green” initiative. Players team up with different community organizations and try to better the environment. The players are shown in pictures digging holes for trees and teaching people how to conserve water. Next is the “Basketball without Borders” initiative. Basically basketball players fly all around the world and play basketball with underprivileged youth from suffering third world countries. Not only do they play basketball with the kids but they build houses for them and
assist in many other types of humanitarian aid. The “Kia Community Assist Award” is also very interesting. Kia awards a basketball player every month for their community service. It seems like a good way to bring positive media attention to basketball players and show the NBA in a positive light. The last initiative is called “Coaches for Kids.” NBA coaches help get kids to NBA games for free and then give them inspiring speeches after the games.

**What do I need to do to overcome the problem?**

The NBA’s main problem is bad publicity because of the actions of some of its players and coaches. This negative view scares away families and their children who will be the future generations of NBA fans. The goal then is to change the reputation of the NBA’s and its members from being viewed as selfish and socially reckless to a reputation of service, caring, outreach and social responsibility which will in turn attract more fans to the NBA. To achieve this goal the NBA Cares objectives are as follows: give the NBA players and coaches a caring image of a role model that is consistent with family values, get younger kids and families to attend more NBA games, make the NBA a family tradition, and expand NBA viewership and the game of basketball into all countries of the world while maintaining a favorable image of the NBA. I feel like these are good objectives and if executed correctly they will achieve the goal set out by NBA Cares.

**Who do I need to reach and motivate to accomplish the objectives and what message do I need to send them?**

To achieve their objectives the NBA focused on four key publics: parents, and youth as well as youth and families from other nations. Let’s tackle the key public of parents first. Parent’s self-interest is a simple one to diagnose. Mothers and fathers are most interested in their kids and family. However the relationship between the NBA and parents has been strained by the negative publicity created from the
irresponsible actions of some NBA’s players. As a result the NBA has targeted this key public with some powerful and specific messages.

A particular message sent by NBA Cares to mothers is that NBA players care about kids and help them succeed. “NBA Cares KIA Community Assist Award” is a good example of how this message is sent to parents. This month's winner was Rudy Gay (Tillery, 2012). News articles and blogs featured his story and highlighted how Gay went and donated his time and money to a children’s research hospital. Gay even went as far as to decorate cookies with the sick children at the hospital and even took one of the children and his family out to dinner and to the basketball game the next day. Although Rudy Gay helped children this message was clearly aimed at mothers. The method that this message was communicated through can tell us more about its target public. NBA Cares communicated this message through giving Gay an award. Awards are something that parents can recognize and appreciate whereas children don’t really care whether or not their favorite player won an award for assisting the community.

Another message targeted to parents is, NBA players and teams are responsible. NBA Cares has an initiative called “NBA Green” that helps send this message to parents. One tactic used was a video posted to the NBA.COM website called Pacers go green (Pacers go, 2012). In the video the Pacers team got together and built a garden shed for an Indianapolis K-8 school. The video shows the local news interviewing the basketball players as they talked about how they take care of their own families and have built things for them in the past.

Another tactic that communicates this same message to parents is the Dallas Mavericks “Trees for Threes program.” For every three pointer that the Mav's make at home in the course of the regular season they promise to plant a tree in the community (City of Arlington, 2009). These trees are planted around schools and parks. These are places where kids and teenagers frequent and spend their time. Parents can see the message that NBA players are good people who care about the community and environment that their kids live in.
Kids are another key public for the NBA Cares campaign. Kids are interested in fun, pure and simple. NBA Cares has a “Read to Achieve” initiative that is targeted towards this self-interest. The campaign has been sending kids through their tactics the message that basketball players and basketball are fun, and help you to succeed. For instance the Milwaukee Bucks give elementary kids a scorecard that allows the kids to tally points for how many books they have read (Katie, 2012). Once they have earned enough points they can turn in their scorecard for a free ticket to the Milwaukee Bucks game. This gets kids to read and gets their parents who are proud of all the reading that their kid just did to take their children to the basketball game. Kids then learn to love basketball and parents take them to the games creating a family tradition.

Kids are also targeted through the “Coaches for Kids” initiative. For example the Trail Blazers coach worked with the local boys and girls clubs and got about 100 kids into the basketball game, after the game the kids got to talk with the coach and ask question and even got to talk to a player (Holdahl, 2009). Kid’s get the message from talking to coaches and players that they are special and important. Kid’s also receive the message that basketball is fun when they get to go to games with all of their peers.

The NBA has also been targeting the international community. It seems as though many of the tactics and strategies used overseas are about doing community service and teaching people to play basketball. The NBA has set its sights on promoting basketball throughout the world with its program “Basketball without Borders.” Especially important publics are the youth and the opinion leaders of these countries. The message being sent to the youth is that basketball is fun, friendly and it brings success and prosperity. An example of this strategy happened when Dikembe Mutombo, Alonso Mourning, and Patrick Ewing visited South Africa. Basketball players from all over Africa came and played with coaches and NBA legends that helped them improve their basketball skills. The coaches and players also helped build homes for “Habitat for Humanity” and taught about AIDS awareness and prevention (NBA, 2011). This effort will help the popularity of basketball in Africa and will also help opinion leaders to view the sport
positively because of the community aid that came along for the ride.

Likewise the NBA found out that Filipinos were the third most often visitors of NBA.com. So Luc Longley a former basketball player and teammate of Michael Jordan visited the Philippines for the launch of NBA.com Philippines. Not only did Longley help with the website launch he taught the Filipinos to play basketball, and even got the mayor to play basketball at his clinic. He was friendly and fun and according to the article “Everybody, it seems, loves Luc Longley. Wouldn’t you (Jazmines, 2012)?” Filipinos are sent the message through this tactic that because Luc Longley is fun, Basketball is also fun.

Who do I need to communicate to in order to achieve my objective and what messages do I need to send them?

The NBA has done a very good job with the first three questions of action planning. However on the fourth question -How do I send those messages so they choose to perceive them and act on them-, they had mixed results.

I myself am an avid basketball fan and I read articles about the sport nearly every day and follow the games pretty closely and I had not even heard of NBA Cares until I was assigned to do this case analysis, however my wife who never follows basketball has seen NBA Cares on T.V. a few times. NBA Cares does many good things and hosts a lot of events all over the world, while these events may gain local news coverage; and be advertised during basketball games on T.V. coverage elsewhere seems to be pretty slim. This may be due to NBA player’s reticence to publicize the acts of service they are doing. An article talking about how superstar Dwyane Wade visited a disabled boy, observed that Wade often visits sick children in private and does not seek media attention when he visits (Associated Press, 2009). While Wade’s service is noble it’s extremely difficult to find any media coverage describing his actions. When Wade’s name is typed in the search box after three pages of articles there is still no mention of any of the good work he does.
It can be difficult to find media coverage outside of NBA.com for any of NBA Cares efforts unless you’re intently looking for it. For instance the NBA Cares YouTube video that features several NBA superstars talking about how basketball is more than just a game got only 37,000 views (changkaiye, 2009). Ironically when I type in world’s largest dodge ball game I get a video from the University of Alberta students union that got 808,372 views (Edjournal, 2010). This dodge ball game was a public relations effort from a small group of students to reach out to students and faculty from their school and it got around 21 times more viewers than the NBA’s highly funded star powered video.

While the NBA is doing many good things with their public relations campaign, they should do more to attract media coverage especially on the internet to accomplish their objectives.

References


