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PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SPORTS FIELD
Ph.D. THESIS SUMMARY

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Abstract

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Public relations in the sports field refers to a managerial function, based on communication, whose mission is to identify the target audience of the sports organization, to evaluate the relationship between it and its public and to improve the relationship between them. The functions of public relations are most often complementary to those of marketing, but the public to whom they are addressed differs. Public relations are a powerful promotional tool, capable of generating advertising for the sports organization.

The most common forms of public relations practice in sports are related to media relations and community relations. The tactic is to maintain a good relationship with the media to minimize the risk of negative news and positive advertising. Community relations refer to structured programs so that the members of the organization come into direct contact with the external environment and participate in various charitable activities to win the public's sympathy. Other types of relationships that are included here are employee relations, investor relationships, customer relationships, sponsor relationships, and government relations.

The use of public relations tools and techniques brings many benefits to the sports organization. It is a powerful marketing tool that can generate brand awareness (brand awareness) and brand association (brand associations).

For the research of our study we applied a triangulation of research methods: sociological investigation, interview and content analysis together with secondary data analysis.

Our work started from the idea of creating a bridge between the two major fields, that of public relations and that of sport. Thus, in this paper we find theoretical notions regarding the sphere of public relations but also of the sphere of sport. I referred to research in the field of public relations in the sports field, which were the first forms of manifestation and how they evolved. Public relations are a sector that continues to develop, although it is quite large. The same thing happens with the sport, which is in a continuous ascent, both in terms of performance and professionalism and in terms of financial exploitation, marketing, advertising and PR. Although the first forms of sports promotion have been around since ancient times, the techniques and tools of public relations used in the sports field are in full development and knowledge.

With the help of the results obtained in the empirical research, we tried to provide concrete and accurate information about the importance of a public relations department in any sports institution and their role. Starting from the theoretical notions mentioned and detailed in the first part of the paper, we set out to investigate, using a triangulation of research methods, what is the real situation and how public relations in the sports field are viewed by our public.

At the beginning of the paper I formulated the research questions from which we started our research. These refer to the specialized press in Romania, to how the public relations practice in the sports sphere is viewed, what is the necessity and role of such a department and what are the criteria that a sports PR specialist should have. We conducted an overall analysis of several sports branches, namely two team sports and two individual sports. I have followed here in what form are the practices of public relations in the sports field, what role they play and how this field is perceived. We tried to highlight how the PR machine can influence the reputation of a sportsman / team or even the sports performance.

The empirical research started with a content analysis in which we analysed all the articles referring to the sports branches analysed in our study: the national batch of handball, tennis, gymnastics and football, articles that appeared for 3 months, in three publications from the online environment. Although our research does not analyse the relationship between the sports environment and the specialized journalists, we considered that it is important to see how the activity and sports performance is reflected in the print media, which is why we appealed in the first part of the empirical research to content analysis.

The results of the content analysis showed us that, during the period analysed, the sport that enjoys the greatest interest from the media is tennis. Most of the articles published during that period were positive, so I said that the image of this sport is a positive one. Football followed as number of published articles. The image of this sport, during the 3 months of analysis, is a negative one. The best image among sports media is handball, with most positive articles published. As number of appearances occupies the third position among the sports branches analysed by us. Although it is a sport with a great track record, gymnastics occupies the last place in our ranking, with the fewest appearances in the print media, during the 3 months. The image of gymnastics during the analysed period is a negative one. Therefore, during the analysed period tennis and handball appear with a positive image and football and gymnastics with a negative image, and the sport that enjoys the most interest from the press is tennis. The monitored period coincided with the development of several competitions, tournaments and sporting events for each category of sport we analysed.

We continued the methodological approach with the use of semi-structured interviews applied to several categories of respondents, which have a direct connection with the four sports branches we refer to in our study. We used four semi-structured interview guides: for representatives of the marketing departments of each federation, a representative of the company that sponsors a certain sports branch, a representative sportsman for each sport and some specialized journalists. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information that would clarify the role and applicability of public relations techniques and tools in the field of sport and were applied until we had obtained new or relevant answers. We wanted to see who is actually dealing with these practices. Also with the help of the semi-structured interview we wanted to get information on the connection between the sports and public relations. I have formulated four interview guides, which also contain common questions. In the first part of the paper I defined the concept of public relations, sports but also public relations in the sports field. We also specified what the role of this department is and what should be the duties of a sports PR specialist. Interpretation of the answers received shows that this is not the case. Most of the time the PR specialist's work is assigned to other people in the staff or departments.

At the end of the research I resorted to the opinion poll, a method by which we set out to obtain additional information, in addition to those we obtained through the content analysis and the semi-structured interview. We wanted to get information on how the surveyed persons perceive the field of sports PR. Due to the resources and possibilities we had, our sample was one of convenience.

The research methods used to obtain the answers to the research questions from which our study started, were the content analysis, the semi-structured interview and the opinion poll.

A specialist in sports PR comes to meet and solve several problems, both external and internal. Currently, the public relations practice in the sports field is very deficient, in some cases even non-existent, as we can see in the second part of our study. This is also found in the answers of the people we interviewed. Among the sports referred to in this paper there are also positive examples, such as the national women's handball team, which nevertheless enjoys a staff that has specialists in the field, and this is also reflected in the activity and performance of the team. The analysis of the answers of the people that we questioned highlighted the need for specialists in the field of sports public relations and their work.

In conclusion, some athletes believe that the existence of a marketing and public relations department could help the team or athlete by attracting sponsors; press people do not

conceive of the development of sport at national level without having specialized people; and sponsors see in the sport a brand awareness gate that is worth exploiting.

Most of the people surveyed are familiar with the phrase public relations in the sports field. I do not know exactly what it means or what it refers to or whether they have not interacted at all with these terms. Those who are familiar with this field are people who work in the field of public relations, but even so the percentage is very small, only 8.3% of the people questioned.

From the analysis of the answers given, it can be observed that most of the respondents encourage the existence of a marketing and public relations department within each federation, team or sports club. And the existence of such a department or the existence of specialized persons can help to achieve the goals of the team or the athletes. The application of a PR strategy also adds to the sporting performance, which helps to achieve the proposed objectives.

Regarding the impact that sport has on our sample, we see that respondents are consumers of sports, in different forms. There is public, there is potential, there is only the specialized people who create, maintain and facilitate the connection between them.

We expected when we started this research to identify what are the strengths and the shortcomings that exist in the case of the topic we have researched. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this research has provided quantifiable evidence on the perception of the people who made up the sample of our study regarding public relations in the sports field. These results could be used to build strategies or marketing and public relations programs to increase the value of sport in Romania.

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