American v. National Football League: Using public relations to “win” a war against a monopoly

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Abstract

No professional sports group ever achieved acceptance as widespread within a single decade’s span as the American Football League (AFL). This study chronicles how the AFL used public relations strategies and tactics to garner public acceptance, which in turn helped convince the older National Football League (NFL) to merge with the upstart league. This study will further the understanding of how trade associations use public relations as an image-building device, as well as address a deficiency in the study of sports public relations.

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1. Introduction

In 2004, the National Football League’s (NFL) 32 franchises shared equally more than 80% of about $5.5 billion in total revenue; this was the most income, and the largest measure of financial cooperation, in the four major U.S. professional sports (Fatsis, 2004). But the NFL was not always the financially strong, all-for-one, one-for-all multinational sports giant that it is today.

In 1960, a new professional football league called the American Football League (AFL) began operations. With this new entrant into the market, the NFL, which had a monopoly on professional football in the United States at the time, had to fight for television viewership and game-day spectators. The battle between the two leagues lasted until executives from each side agreed to merge business operations in 1966 and to have AFL teams begin playing against NFL teams in 1970. This study chronicles how the AFL used public relations strategies and tactics to garner public acceptance, which in turn helped convince the NFL to unite with the upstart league.

The study of AFL public relations warrants scholarly review because, as Miller (2000) said, the histories of many industries and corporations are incomplete because their programs to craft an image for their businesses have not been investigated or evaluated. This study will further the understanding of how trade associations such as the AFL use public relations as an image-building device. The limited literature available on the public relations efforts of trade associations focuses on congressional lobbying. For instance, Cutlip (1994) found that trade associations representing the railroad industry informed, organized, and activated as many “legitimate, strong and politically aggressive groups as already exist, or that can be brought into existence for their own self-interest” to defeat legislation introduced in
1949 that favored the railroads’ rival, trucking (p. 576). This study will also address a deficiency in the study of sports public relations. Although professional sports generate global revenues of more than $38 billion in television rights and ticketing alone (McKinsey Quarterly, 2004), little academic research has been done on this industry. Sports, which some might not see as a business and which has often received favorable media coverage with limited public relations help (Anderson, 2001), provides an interesting case study to answer why some organizations even have a public relations department.

2. Methodology

The author sought to understand how AFL officials used its public relations department to introduce and to position the new league to the sports-buying public by conducting research at the Pro Football Hall of Fame Library (PFHFL), the largest repository of archival materials related to professional football. The library had archival files that contained newspaper clippings as well as primary documents such as personal and business correspondence of owners and officials. Reviewing the primary documents helped determine the motives behind industry action.

To examine how sports journalists responded to AFL-initiated messages, the author reviewed the newspaper clippings in each PFHFL file. Since the selection of the newspaper clippings for each file may have been arbitrary, the author supplemented each file’s contents by using microfilm research and reviewing the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature for the years 1960–1966.

3. AFL public relations

A review of these materials showed that AFL public relations helped the new league succeed by spurring fan interest, influencing the sports media to cover the new league in a favorable manner, and enticing college players to sign with the AFL to play professional football.

3.1. Consumer relations

AFL owners appointed Congressional Medal of Honor winner and former governor of South Dakota Joe Foss the league’s commissioner on 13 November 1959. Foss felt that public relations was the most important activity that he could contribute to the improvement of the AFL’s image, and he spent 60h per week on such projects (American Football League, 1963, p. 15). He arranged speaking engagements at every outpost, appearing, as he said, “anywhere they’d have me.” Small-town booster banquets, Rotary, and Kiwanas clubs were all part of Foss’ agenda. He crisscrossed the country, logging more than 200,000 miles in his attempt to sell the AFL (Gruver, 1997, p. 33). Foss said, “I talked to anyone who would listen—hair-burners, rivetters, plumbers, political conventions, the Elks, the Moose, or the Owls” (Gruver, 1997, p. 33). His speeches, one listener noted, “were part Sioux Falls simplicity, part Madison Avenue public relations.” Foss “appealed to many small-town citizens as a commoner, a circumstance that helped them identify with the underdog AFL” (Gruver, 1997, p. 33).

The “underdog” AFL also attracted fans with its public-focused attitude toward television. The AFL adopted the first 14-game schedule in pro football history, the two-point conversion after a touchdown rule college football used, made the game clock the official timekeeper, and gave the media a free hand in game coverage. The NFL validated AFL ideas by adopting jersey nameplates, revenue sharing, official timing (NFL had two clocks – one for fans and one for officials – confusing to fans since only officials knew how much time remained), and the two-point conversion.

The viewing public responded to this version of professional football. The average national total audience for the AFL was 16.8 in 1960, dipped to 16.4 in 1961, but rose to 18.2 in 1962. AFL telecasts were presented in 119 stations in 1961 and rose to 155 stations in 1962 (American Football League, 1963, p. 13). By 1965, AFL games were broadcast on 175 stations, 21 more than in 1964; the total television audience rose by 25% from the previous year; and average game-day attendance rose 35% from the previous year (American Football League, 1966b, pp. 1–2).

3.2. Media relations

The AFL attracted fans to its ranks despite its mixed results in media relations. Some in the national media slighted the new league. CBS-TV, which then carried NFL games, refused to give AFL game scores on its football broadcasts.
Sports Illustrated ridiculed the new league, and showed its bias in lush, full page color action shots of the NFL, while it used black and white photos in its AFL coverage (see, e.g., “Big pass wins . . .” 1961; Maule, 1962; Terrell, 1961). One example of the unbalanced coverage in the publication was when a Sports Illustrated writer produced a four-column story on the professional football season; only half of the four columns focused on the AFL, while the remaining space discussed the NFL (Maule, 1961).

On the other hand, local newspapers supported their hometown AFL team. Local sports journalists are often eager to support or defend their respective city’s economic and symbolic interests, such as sports teams (Anderson, 2000). This seemed to happen in the case of journalists covering the AFL, which was for some cities the only professional sports in town. Four of the eight AFL teams (Buffalo, Denver, Houston, and Dallas—though the NFL came to the city after the AFL did) were in cities without NFL or Major League Baseball teams. Buffalo Bills owner Ralph Wilson told this anecdote: “I said to Paul [Neville, editor of Buffalo News], ‘If I put a franchise in Buffalo and give it a three-year trial, will your paper support me?’ He said, ‘Oh, definitely’” (Miller, 2003, p. 9).

The steady increase in fans was one reason the league’s media relations efforts gradually improved on the national scene. Commissioner Foss’ appointment of former sportswriters Milt Woodard (assistant commissioner) and Al Ward (publicity director) was another. Woodward and Ward worked with AFL owners and officials to provide coordinated media relations. AFL coaches were required to participate in scheduled press parties and functions (American Football League, 1961, p. 6); the commissioner’s office also required each AFL club to publish a press guide (American Football League, 1963, p. 17). More importantly, Woodward and Ward ensured that league publicity would be released centrally by the public relations department in the commissioner’s office; they further recommended that local publicity respecting an individual club should be cleared with the league office (American Football League, 1959, pp. 2–3). They stressed the importance of all persons connected with the AFL making only positive statements about the progress of the league and suggested that most statements should come from the commissioner and not from owners (American Football League, 1966b, p. 2). Ward (1960) noted that “cooperation on these points [from individual owners] has been extremely good.”

Ward discussed the gradual improvement in national media relations coverage at the 1962 AFL owners meeting. Ward explained that both the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) planned weekly features on two AFL players, and that in most football periodicals there was indication that AFL would receive proportionate coverage with NFL (American Football League, 1962b, pp. 1–2).

At the 1964 owners’ meeting, Jack Horrigan, AFL director of promotions and special projects, stated that he felt the image and public acceptance of the league had improved during the past year to where columns and sports stories were 90% positive. He attributed the calling off of games after J.F.K.’s assassination as being the greatest advancement in the prestige of the league (the NFL, on the other hand, did not cancel its games the weekend after the president’s death). Horrigan showed how the UPI story length on AFL game statistics had been increased from 150 to 300 words per week and that the volume of game coverage was equal to the NFL. Features on the AFL, emanating from the commissioner’s office, had increased by one-third. He also found that the AP had increased its number of words on the AFL by 5% from the previous year and that coverage on key AFL games was equal to the NFL (American Football League, 1964, p. 3).

At the next year’s owners’ meeting, Horrigan reported that both wire services gave AFL equal coverage to NFL in 1964. Sixty-four writers had attended the championship game in Buffalo, double the number of any previous final championship game. Horrigan also reported an increase in requests for football magazine coverage of AFL teams and players. Four cover pictures in color, all involving the AFL, were used in football magazines in 1964. Horrigan estimated AFL received favorable coverage 95% of the time in broadcast and print media (American Football League, 1965, p. 5).

Horrigan also noted that the annual AFL Guide, which was distributed to media outlets, had increased its circulation from 5800 in 1961 to 32,000 in 1965 (American Football League, 1966b, p. 11).

3.3. Labor recruitment

No one would have attended, watched, or reported on the games, however, without talent on the field. The wealth of the AFL owners enticed some college players to sign with the newer league instead of the NFL, but public relations
also played a role. The owners decided at the 1962 annual owners meeting to develop a brochure directed at college seniors, such as the older league did with its “NFL and You” brochure (American Football League, 1962a, pp. 6–7). The league printed 5000 copies of the 64-page AFL recruiting booklet and distributed them to college campuses that year (American Football League, 1962b, p. 1).

While the brochure alone cannot account for all the players who signed with the newer league, it does indicate the manner in which AFL officials tried to appeal to college players. Three themes were prevalent in the brochure: (1) the AFL wanted to be a player’s league; that is, a league where the AFL owners cared about players as individuals and did not just think about them as football players; (2) each player had an early opportunity to play as a rookie, and (3) the AFL could provide national exposure to each player. The first page of the brochure had Commissioner Foss quoting a former league executive, who said, “We want this to be a players’ league. We want the boy to join the city as well as the team, to remain in the city where he plays and participate in its business and social actions. We want to help get him established in business life and become a full-time citizen, even when he had finished playing” (Ward, 1962, p. 3).

League officials also wanted college players to know they would have an early chance to play. The recruiting brochure mentioned that each AFL team had an average of 34 rookies, which was one-third of active rosters (Ward, 1962, p. 43). Even before the 1962 recruiting brochure was released, the AFL public relations staff had distributed press releases that echoed the brochure’s “chance to play” message. One 1960 press release writer said, “So deep has the quality been in training camps that experienced veterans were cut off in droves, making way for bright and talented rookies around whom AFL coaches will build their teams” (American Football League, 1960).

The recruiting brochure also stressed how the college player could receive national exposure by playing with the AFL. Ward (1962) argued that the “individual player receives national exposure unmatched by any other league and, possibly, any other sport” (p. 54). The brochure detailed the example of Buffalo Bill player Tom Keating, who had played his college career in the University of Michigan’s 101,000 seat stadium. “Yet they would have to fill 60 Wolverines Stadiums to match the number of people who watched Keating on AFL television on the normal Sunday afternoon this season,” wrote Ward (1962, p. 54).

The AFL showed a steady increase in the number of college players it signed. In 1963, a NFL press release noted that NFL teams had “signed 151 players of those drafted for the 1963 season” with “only 56 players deciding to play with other professional leagues.” (National Football League, 1963). By 1966, the AFL had signed 8 of the 17 consensus All-America choices, and the AFL’s nine teams signed seven No. 1 draft choices, which meant they only lost two to the NFL (American Football League, 1966a).

4. Discussion

The AFL never outpaced the NFL in game-day attendance or television ratings, yet the newer league did steadily rise in these areas during its existence. AFL public relations helped present the league as an upstart, a maverick, an exciting new version of professional football antithetical to the boring, conservative, traditional football played in the NFL. This study in image making has implications not only for historians, but also for today’s practitioners and scholars. For public relations practitioners working for trade associations, this study indicated the importance of strong leadership committed to public relations and the value of group think (i.e., the AFL owners allowed the commissioner’s office to control league communication since this was what was best for the league, even if they did not think it was best for them individually). This case study showed how public relations, combined with organizational action, can proactively craft an image that is believable to the desired audience.

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