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Crisis Communication

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Terrel Owens' Image Repair Attempt

In the early 2000's Terrell Owens was considered one of the National Football League's most talented athletes, yet was infamous for his dishonorable attitude when facing the press. In March of 2004 Owens signed a seven year, 49 million dollar contract with the Eagles (Walmer, 2005). Owens complained in various news reports about having no leverage at the time his contract was renegotiated with the Eagles. Owens and his agent had little input in coming to terms with a more appropriate deal when the NFL brokered a deal with the Eagles. Owens stated to the press, "[The NFL] used their leverage to strong-arm us because they knew I wanted to leave Baltimore for Philadelphia, and they capitalized on it. I can't go for that now" (Walmer, 2005). Owens received harsh criticism for his self centeredness and bad sportsmanship after the Philadelphia Eagles refused to renegotiate his contract after one season. When word was out about Owens' contract now being renewed, he became sullen with the press, belligerent with the coaching staff, and publicly critical of his team and quarterback (Brazeal 2008). When Owens returned to the Eagles for training camp in 2005, he was told to go home only a few days in after a heated dispute with Coach Reid, and was told not to come back for a week. An ESPN report stated that Reid told Owens to leave after Owens "dropped an expletive" on him during the exchange about the wide receiver's practice session that was conducted apart from the team (ESPN.com News Services, 2005). When questioned about his altercation with Reid, he tried to shift the blame saying they were antagonizing him to speak out in a way that was not in a business matter. To add to the matter, Owens called

his quarterback, Donovan McNabb a "hypocrite" because he said publicly that he did not want to meet with Owens, while Owens said McNabb did try to arrange a meeting. This is another example of Owens using denial and shifting the blame, yet to another person, McNabb. As a result of this behavior, the Eagles deactivated Owens. It was not until after Owens was deactivated from the Eagles that Owens came forward with an apology to his coach and his quarterback, using mortification to own up to his actions.

Review of Literature

Benoit explains image repair messages to focus on one particular goal in discourse, which is always repairing one's reputation. It is noted in the book that repairing one's reputation is not the only goal of image repair discourse, nor is it the most important, it mostly just depends on the specific situation regarding a person or a cooperation. When one's reputation is or may be threatened, we must take action to restore the reputation using image repair strategies. The image repair strategies that Owens used in this case study were denial at first, and then later mortification.

Denial is when one denies that they did the wrongful act (Benoit, 1995). One may deny alleged facts, sentiments, objects or relationships. Denial is reformative in the sense that such strategies do not attempt to change the audience's meaning or affect for whatever it is in question. One aspect of denial that Owens used specifically was shifting the blame.

Mortification is when the accused may admit the wrongful act and ask for forgiveness (Benoit, 1995). If the audience believes that the apology is sincere, they may decide to pardon the wrongful act and forgive the accused. Along with an apology, the accused may admit to regret and guilt.

Some examples of similar image repair cases to Owens' are the case studies of Jon and Kate Plus 8, Ricky Gervais, and David Letterman. Each of these case studies are similar

because they are about celebrities that seemed to act or say things that were out of place, and each of them received harsh criticism from the public. For celebrities who are always in the public eye, their mistakes are not taken lightly. Jon and Kate's divorce was highly publicized, with many studies regarding both of their attempts to repair their reputations after the prolonged divorce (Moody, 2011). Their case is similar to Owens' because of the role that the media played in their image repair discourse. Ricky Gervais's case was about his efforts to repair his image after his harsh, mean-spirited jokes about the awards, guests, and nominees when he hosted the 2011 Golden Globe Awards (Kauffman, 2011). Much like Owens' case, his words caused harsh criticism of his character and morals. Lastly, David Letterman's case is also similar in the sense that his words to the media were conceived negatively by the public, leaving his reputation hurt until he pursued image repair strategies such as denial, mortification, and corrective action (Compton & Miller, 2011).

Analysis

Immediately following Owens getting asked to leave the Eagles training camp for his conflict with Coach Reid, Owens complained on several reports about Reid and McNabb. On November 8, 2005 Terrell Owens made a public apology outside of his house to coach Andy Reid, quarterback Donovan McNabb, the team's owner and president, and fans with hopes of returning to the Eagles immediately after the apology. In the public apology, Owens stated "I would like to reiterate my respect for Donovan McNabb as a quarterback and as a teammate, I apologize to him for any comments that may have been negative" (Organization, 2019) In this quote, Owens is trying to take responsibility for his wrongful words spoken about McNabb, and is hoping to gain the forgiveness of McNabb by using flattery and stating that he respects him, despite his previous actions and words towards him. This is an example of how Owens used mortification after the fact of already using denial directly following the training camp conflicts.

By using mortification, Owens ended up fully owning up to his words and actions and actually apologized for them, hoping for the forgiveness of his teammates, and his coach. Owens was motivated to make this public apology by his hopes to return to his team immediately after this was over.

Evaluation

Owens was remorseful in his public apology mainly applying mortification strategies to his attempt of image repair. However, Owens' image repair strategies were not seen as successful. By shifting the blame of the conflicts onto others, Owens hurt his own case. Owens' agent Rosenhaus sealed his fate by launching numerous attacks against Owens' accusers, and appearing aggressive and arrogant when employing mortification strategies (Brazeal, 2008). In their attempt to restore Owens' image, they first bolstered by painting him as the victim, and never discussed any corrective action that Owens could plan to take in order to prevent future conflicts if he was able to return to the Eagles. Ultimately, their strategies were deemed a complete failure to understand the culture of team sport, which demands unity, commitment, and sacrifice, and failed to earn Owens' reinstatement (Brazeal, 2008).

In conclusion, Terrell Owens is a great example of a celebrity whose image and reputation was completely tarnished because of his wrongful actions and poor delivery of his image repair strategies. I believe that if Terrell Owens would have added a plan for corrective action to his public apology to Donovan McNabb and Coach Reid that the Eagles would have thought about taking him back on the team and his fan would not have "canceled" him the way that they did.

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