

PR Lessons Learned From Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood

Arthur Solomon

Mr. Rodgers neighborhood has dramatically changed over the years. At one time, the great majority of the sports media and probably 100% of athletes would have built a protective wall around Mr. Rodgers house. But those days are gone and PR people should keep that in mind when selecting an athlete as a publicity spokesperson.

Despite the fact that Mr. Rodgers neighborhood only has affluent residents, it is an unsafe neighborhood. That's because so many who live in Mr. Rodgers neighborhood include residents who have been arrested for various criminal activities, including domestic violence, drinking while intoxicated, using performance enhancing drugs and engaging in other unlawful activities. But except for the persons who were the victims of the criminal conduct, the only people affected were members of the sports family – other players and their teams, sports marketing sponsors, and broadcasters, all of whom live in the fairy tale-like neighborhood of which Mr. Rodgers is among the most prominent citizen..

But until recently all of the ill doings remained walled off because it didn't really affect the lives of people who lived outside of Mr. Rodgers neighborhood, the sports fans – unless they lost a bet because an important player was sidelined while investigations were underway. Now it does, because of the Mr. Rodgers who is the subject of this column: Aaron Rodgers, the star quarterback of the Green Bay Packers, who is also the reigning Most Valuable Player in the National Football League (MVP). For those who don't follow sports, yes, it's the same Aaron Rodgers who was a guest host on Jeopardy! for two weeks earlier this year, when the correct answers he

gave to wrong replies were never challenged, as his comments about Covid-19 were.

Rodgers might have known all the correct answers when he hosted Jeopardy! but he gave the wrong answer to a question, saying he was “immunized” against Covid19 when he wasn’t. But after the three time MVP tested positive for Covid, it became public that Rodgers did not receive the approved Covid-19 vaccines. Instead he said his homeopathic methods “immunized” him against the virus, knowing that what he said went against all medically proven scientific evidence and would give the

impression that he received authorized CDC approved vaccines. Too make matters worse, he went on a radio program trying to defend his positions. Instead he ended up attacking the “woke mob,” said he was a victim of “cancel culture,” attacked politicians of the left and right, accused the media of being on a “witch hunt” to determine the vaccination status of NFL players and said that a NFL doctor told him it would be “impossible for a vaccinated person to catch or spread Covid,” which the NFL denied.

Rodgers is an example of what I always tell clients: “Using an athlete as a publicity spokesperson does not come without risks.”

There are so many PR lessons that can be learned from the Rodgers situation that it would take a 1000 page text book to detail them all. Below are some of the most important?

- When choosing a spokesperson during a PR crisis, it is important to make certain the person can remain on script in the face of hostile questions. Unlike Rodgers, an experienced spokesperson avoids making statements that can come back to bite you.
- Rodgers could have issued a written statement defending his position, thus avoiding at least some follow-up

questions from the media.

- Never mislead the media. Chances are great that eventually the truth will be revealed.
- Often, despite what some self-anointed crisis specialists say, the best strategy during a crisis is to make an initial statement and then stay mute until the situation is resolved. If necessary, the company can provide updates on a website.
- Always reply to a reporter's question during a PR crisis with a short answer; do not be expansive. Rodgers opened up Pandora's Box by being expansive and delving into an issue that had nothing to do with his vaccination status.
- When selecting a spokesperson to answer questions during a PR crisis, the top-ranking executive is not always the best choice, as research from the Boeing, Wells Fargo and BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spills, and other crises, prove. In Rodgers' case, after his initial statement explaining his reasoning not to be vaccinated with approved vaccines, he should have had an experienced spokesperson reply to follow-up questions – perhaps a PR rep from the Green Bay Packers.
- During a PR crisis, do not expect your media friends to play down the crisis. Editors are watching the reporters.
- Never lie or mislead the media. If you are asked a question that you don't want to answer, say something like, "I'll get back to you on that." And always do so after you have had time to craft a response that helps your client.
- Never say anything that is "off the record." If you don't want the comment to appear in a story don't say it.
- Never rush to make a statement during a PR crisis until at least preliminary facts are learned. Better to say, "We're looking into the situation and will get back to you when we have facts to report."

- Always clear any statement to the media with the company's attorney.
- And remember, unlike certain articles of clothing, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to a PR crisis. Every crisis needs original thinking.

On November 9 Rodgers, arguably the best quarterback in the NFL, said, reported the AP, "I shared an opinion that's polarizing," "I get it. And I misled some people about my status, which I take full responsibility of, those comments. But in the end, I have to stay true to who I am and what I'm about. I stand behind the things that I said."

But his reputation has been tarnished and it will take more than one statement to repair it, if it can be repaired, as criticism from infectious disease physicians continued to multiply for days after Rodgers made his misleading and unscientific statement.

Note to PR practitioners: Reputations can change pretty fast. "The Green Bay Packers star QB's net favorability rating among U.S. adults dropped from 29 points in August to 3 points over the weekend," reported a Morning Consult survey released on November 9.

Rodgers has already lost one sponsor – the Wisconsin-based health care organization Prevea Health. And another sponsor, the State Farm Insurance Company, greatly reduced the number of televised ads featuring Rodgers, according to reports from organizations that track that sort of thing. Question: What makes Rodgers or any other celebrity qualified to give advice about products? My answer: "Beats me."

The criticism from health experts was not a surprise. What was a surprise was that what was thought unthinkable a few years ago occurred – Rodgers was criticized by athletes. On Fox NFL Sunday, Jerry Bradshaw, Jimmy Johnson, Michael Strahan and Howie Long all criticized Rodgers for his Covid comments on

their November 7 pregame show at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md.

Bradshaw was particularly critical of Rodgers giving the impression that he was vaccinated against the coronavirus. "I'll give Aaron Rodgers some advice," said Bradshaw, a Pro Football Hall of Famer, who quarterbacked the Pittsburgh Steelers to four Super Bowl victories. "It would have been nice if he had just come to the Naval Academy and learned how to be honest. Learned not to lie. Because that's what you did, Aaron. You lied to everyone. I understand 'immunized.' What you were doing was taking stuff that would keep you from getting COVID-19. You got COVID-19."

Also highly critical of Rodgers was NBA Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who said in his Substack news letter that Rodgers put people's health at risk and "damaged professional sports."

"Rodgers ignorance regarding the science of immunology brings back to life the old stereotype of the big dumb jock. His utter lack of even the most basic knowledge and logic is shocking," wrote Abdul-Jabbar.

The NFL's handling of the Rodgers situation is familiar, or should be, to anyone in our business that works for an agency with more than one employee: The employee handbook rules, with its "dos and don'ts" do not apply equally to all employees. At agencies, low-level employees are punished for even the slightest violation of rules, but transgressions by management favorites or "rainmakers" are overlooked or minimized unless they become public knowledge. In Rodgers case, he was fined \$14,650 for not following the league and players' union Covid-19 protocols, the equivalent of the affect that one rain drop has falling in an ocean – none. No one likes to be fined, but Rodgers, who signed a 4 year, \$134,000,000 contract with the Green Bay Packers, including a \$57,500,000 signing bonus, \$98,700,000 guaranteed, and an average annual salary of

\$33,500,000 and in 2021 will earn a base salary of \$1,100,000, plus a signing bonus of \$14,464,706 and a roster bonus of \$6,800,000, according to Spotrac , the largest online sports team, and player contract resource on the internet, makes me strongly believe that the fine will not affect his style of living.

It's been many a touchdown, home run or three-pointer since I cared if a team won or lost a game. But I'm rooting for Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers to advance to the Super Bowl. Not that I care if they win or lose the game. What would interest me as a PR pro is how the NFL will promote a game in which one of its teams and one of the best players in the league were fined for breaking Covid restrictions. It wouldn't surprise me if they're thinking about that right now and hoping the Packers aren't there on Super Bowl Sunday.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at arthursolomon4pr@juno.com or artsolomon4pr@optimum.net.