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Building an Athletics Brand Through Integrated Marketing Communication: A White Paper of Best Practices

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**Building an Athletics Brand Through Integrated Marketing Communication: A
White Paper of Best Practices**

by

Bradley DePrez

A creative component submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Dr. Tracy Lucht, Major Professor
Dr. Jay Newell
Dr. Stacy Tye-Williams

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this creative component. The Graduate College will ensure this creative component is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Digital media are powerful tools that continue to evolve, leading businesses and organizations to turn toward social media and visual media to connect with their audiences. This is also true for college athletics departments across the country. From recruiting athletes and connecting with boosters to enhancing the game-day experience, digital media play a huge role. Now, more than ever, it has become imperative that the people who work to build these messages work in a congruent manner. The strategic message is extremely important. On Instagram alone, more than 240 million accounts are there specifically to follow sports teams (Golliver, 2018).

Much more goes into building an athletics brand than what happens on the field. Collegiate social media accounts have hundreds of thousands of followers—millions in some cases. When a game is nationally televised, hundreds of thousands more tune in to watch. Beyond the play on the field, athletics departments must be conscious of what else those viewers are consuming. What are they seeing on social media after a big win? What is the instant reaction to a team or a university? How can athletics departments capitalize on a big win using social media the following week? While stadium atmosphere and game-day experience are important components to a positive identification with a university's athletics team, there is a limit to the number of people who actually attend the games. A much larger audience is outside the stadium, consuming athletics content.

In college sports communication, the educational institution is as important a variable as the athletics department is. Indeed, the two are symbiotic. When an athletics department is successful, the academic institution benefits (Chung, 2013). A study at the Harvard Business School found that when a school's football team strengthens from average (defined as not

earning a bowl game invitation or being invited to a lower-level bowl game) to great (defined as contending for a January bowl game), undergraduate applications rise by nearly 20% (Chung, 2013).

Communications offices, marketing offices, graphic design offices and video departments must all interact and communicate regularly to ensure that an effective strategic message is being presented. These offices must not operate independently if they wish to achieve their goals in the most efficient and effective manner. Although these departments may be able to operate individually and create solid content, they are at their best when they are all working toward the same mission (Keller, 2001).

This paper will demonstrate how concepts related to integrated marketing communication can be used to strengthen an athletics department's brand. Based on available scholarship and interviews with current athletics communications professionals at major universities, I will argue that athletics departments should invest in their communication strategies. I will also suggest a set of best practices and describe the optimal functions of different organizational roles.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) is not a new idea to technology or communication professionals. In fact, it was described in a model created by Kotler and Mindak in 1978. In it, they described several hypothetical models a business could use in its communication efforts. The first was called the separate-but-equal function. This was when the public relations and marketing divisions of an organization had equal power but operated on separate agendas. The next was an equal but overlapping model in which each had equal power, but the responsibilities were divided in half. The third model was one in which the two were integrated, but the marketing department had a larger say than the public relations department. The fourth was like the third, only the roles were reversed; public relations had the larger stake and marketing took a back seat. In the first four scenarios described, the authors theorized that the product created might be acceptable or even the one desired, but it would not be done the most efficient way. Finally, they recommended a model they deemed the ideal scenario, in which public relations and marketing were equal and worked side by side through the entire process of communication (Kotler & Mindak, 1978).

Dilenschneider (1991) had a similar belief and suggested several practices companies should implement in order to build a better message. His number-one suggestion was to integrate marketing departments. Planning was key to the execution of a message, he argued. Each part of a communications team should be involved in all meetings and in agreement on decision-making endeavors. Another key to success that he outlined was education, by which he meant everyone in the organization should be versed in the company's message so that every employee could be utilized in spreading the brand and message. He also proposed that communications professionals needed to be trained "laterally." This meant that public

relations specialists should get advertising experience, advertisers should get marketing experience, and so on. This allowed for a company to be more flexible and to diversify itself with a smaller number of people (Dilenschneider, 1991).

This requires strategic communicators to be conscious of the flow of information between those who are delivering the message and the public receiving the message. Schultz (1993) wrote that IMC reversed traditional communication models by starting with the customer and working back to the organization. He posited that communication planners must look at the whole picture, prioritizing the consumer. Research must be done to find out what the consumer wants or needs, and then a message should be drawn up to fit those needs (Schultz, 1993). In the outside-in approach that Schultz proposed, the organization must look out, see what its consumer wants, and then build a message that fits that need. A message that served consumers in a manner that pleased them would be effective, he wrote. A key element of this idea was the concept of a relationship. Schultz argued that communications professionals need to build a relationship with their consumers in order for their messages to reach consumers and affect them the way they were intended (Schultz, 1993).

Gathering the information suggested by Schultz's approach depends on the availability of data and databases. In order to find out what consumers are taking in, what they want to take in, and what their neighbors are taking in, practitioners must find a way to obtain that information. Successful IMC practitioners stockpile this data. Not only should relevant information be collected and stored, but it should be accessible to everyone working on the communication efforts of an organization (O'Connor & Galvin, 1997). Everything a company does should be filtered into one database. Everything a communications department builds should be accessible to every employee the same way that every tax document from

the business department or legal complaint from the risk management office should be accessible, within reason, to every employee (O'Connor & Galvin, 1997). It's important for individuals within the communication division of an organization to be educated on what is going on in other departments (Dilenschneider, 1991). They might not be able to do each person's job, but they should understand how each person's job betters the company.

Ten years after his thoughts on outside-in IMC were published, Schultz weighed in on the importance of databases. This time, he called the database "the center of integrated marketing communication," furthering its importance in the system (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). Databases are useful because they collect personally identifiable information (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). This could be how much money someone makes, the car they drive, or the television shows they watch. Any information that a communications specialist can use to tailor a message is useful. The more information that can be stockpiled in a database, the more relevant the communication that can be provided to the individuals (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). Once the information is gathered, it must continue to be gathered. It is important that marketing databases not only continue to gather new information, but retain and refine the old information (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). When talking with executives and bottom-line pushers, it is easy for communication managers to quantify data. Data is equal to money (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). Schultz argued that collecting data should be a priority for any organization sculpting a message (Schultz & Schultz, 2003). It allows for information to go from point A to point B in the quickest, most efficient and most cost-effective manner (Schultz & Schultz, 2003).

In 1996, Petrison and Wang developed two beliefs that they felt led to a more effective integrated marketing communication system. One was that the integration was

executable and that there was an agreement on the process of integration (Petrison & Wang, 1996). This meant that everyone involved had the same vision for the theme of the message, the tonality, the values the sender wanted to portray, the appeal and the physical makeup (Petrison & Wang, 1996). The second was the actual planning of the integration. Everyone being integrated saw through that each part being combined was working toward the same goal on an operational level (Petrison & Wang, 1996).

The same year, Duncan and Caywood introduced three other ideas they argued were important for successful implementation of IMC practices. The first was that for integration to be successful, communication must be fully integrated internally; no piece could be left out (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). The second was that all external agencies must be integrated in some capacity with the internal agencies. Going back to Dilenschneider's ideas, this meant that not only should the communications team be on the same page, but everyone outside of it also must understand the communication objectives (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). The third was that communication between an organization and its stakeholders should follow a consistent pattern. There should never be a breach in that connection (Duncan & Caywood, 1996).

When working with stakeholders—people within your department, in another area of the organization, or outside the organization—three questions must be asked (Donaldson & Preston, 1995): 1) Who are the stakeholders? 2) What are their needs? 3) How do they realize their own interests?

The first question is simple. Communications professionals must first figure out whom they want to reach. A message would be crafted much differently to an executive one hopes to persuade to provide a larger budget vs. a consumer one hopes to reach with

marketing content. The second question can be answered via information in databases. Although the answer may not jump out at first, it always lies within the data (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The third is more difficult to answer; however, it is the most important. It might be determined by whether or not a consumer bought the product that was advertised, or it could require tracking a change in attitude over a longer period of time (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Successfully integrating these ideas takes time and patience, and plans may need to be tweaked along the way (Schultz, 1997). Integrating managers need to keep in mind that no matter what the message is, they must remain strategic in their planning (Schultz, 1997).

The researchers cited above have different perspectives regarding what IMC looks like in practice. Theoretically, there is little opposition to the idea of integrated marketing communication. At its base, IMC allows for the message of an organization to be constructed strategically, leading to the biggest intended (and sometimes unintended) impact on the audience. It also creates the most efficient route to an end product. It allows for communications professionals to have a large say in decisions that affect the whole company and gives them a voice among the top executives.

However, some researchers do not see theory translating easily into practice. They agree that IMC is a good idea but argue it is not practical in its current conceptualization. In 1997, McArthur and Griffin laid out reasons why IMC would not work in practice. The first was there was little support from executives at the top of organizations (McArthur & Griffin, 1997). Although companies have come a long way in the past 20 years, it still seems there is some reluctance to see strategic communication as a vital asset to a company's bottom line. The second reason they believed IMC would not work in practice was organizational

preoccupation, meaning there were so many other things going on that a company likely would not have the time or resources to effectively implement a new integrated model for their workplace (McArthur & Griffin, 1997). If all of the functions that needed to be integrated already existed on their own, uprooting them from a routine that has already been established would throw everything off and might be too much work in some executives' minds.

Percy broke it down further, offering four reasons why IMC would not work in the real world and why, he said, it was only a theoretical construct (Percy, 1997):

1. The decision-making framework. It is difficult to integrate the decision-making that must happen to execute and produce a strategic message. For example, it might be difficult to pull in multiple directors who are used to making decisions for their own departments. They would either have to restructure themselves so that one person takes the lead or assimilate, becoming co-leaders. Many strategic communication professionals do not get a seat at the table with the executives and major policymakers, which does not allow for a clear, transparent transition of power. In addition, other employees may find it difficult to switch supervisors. They might appear subordinate on the outside while reverting back to their old ways and practices. This is because the culture that already exists is inflexible and not malleable (Percy, 1997).

2. Cognition toward integrated marketing communication. The second component goes hand in hand with the first. There must be a consensus from those in charge. If an agreement cannot be reached initially, most organizations will throw out the idea and move on with what is less likely to upset the status quo. It is also difficult to get everyone on board. In large companies, there may be hundreds of employees who must be in-the-know on a new

integrated system. If every employee is not clear on what is occurring, the new system is sure to fail. Finally, it takes firm leadership. If those at the top are not steadfast and firm and begin to waver, they will lose the confidence of those they lead and the system will seem flawed (Percy, 1997).

3. Lack of reward. Another outcome of communication managers' not having pull at the top is lack of influence over the budget. If executives do not see strategic communication as important, it will not be included in the budget in the significant way that marketing managers would like to see. In integrated marketing communication, it is difficult to divvy up budget allotments to begin with. People within the organization understand they are all on the same team; however, they still have their own agendas and ideas about how things should be done. In addition, someone must be credited with the success or failure of a strategic communication project. Even as that branch of an organization appears to operate as one from the outside, internally there is still some division of responsibilities. Some may want to take credit for work they did not do, while others do not receive the proper recognition for the work they did do (Percy, 1997).

4. Marketing trends. At the time of Percy's research, this was certainly a major element. Today's technology and the different media platforms available to communication professionals did not yet exist. There were not as many resources or people to do the jobs that needed to be performed. Upper-level managers did not see the need for integrated marketing communication and largely saw it as a waste of time, money, and resources (Percy, 1997).

Percy (1997) and McArthur and Griffin (1997) pointed out the flaws in assuming IMC theories and ideas are feasible. However, very little field research has been conducted to see if they actually occur. Nyilasy & Ots (2017) were frustrated with how theory had lagged

behind technology and real-world application and introduced practice theory (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). To operationalize the elements of a working strategic communication process, they broke it down into five categories: 1) routines; 2) material set-ups, or tools; 3) rules and procedural knowledge, or instructions; 4) cultural templates, or how things are done; and teleoaffective structures, or personal understandings (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). They selected a large company in Sweden that had more than 5,000 employees and a marketing operation that utilized integrated marketing communication. They conducted an ethnographic study that lasted for two years (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017), describing how each element of their working theory of IMC played out in the field.

For routines, the organization followed the same patterns in planning, research, operationalizing and measuring (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). They observed that many departments were involved throughout the entire process, and that much of the work centered on planning and coordinating. When it was time to execute, things moved quickly and orderly. As far as material set-ups went, the company mostly worked out of the same Excel documents, which allowed them to stay connected and coordinated with the same information. The company's IMC plan was not set up "by the book" (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). Even though there was not a strict set of rules, it appeared everyone worked under the assumption that they were all under the same umbrella and working toward the same goals, just with different responsibilities. The research showed that the employees within the company saw the company in two ways: as a traditional sales company but also as a new and creative outlet (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). They predicted that as this IMC model took root and became normalized, the company's identity would shift toward the latter. There were mixed understandings of what IMC was supposed to accomplish for the company. Some thought it

was meant to accomplish day-to-day and week-to-week tactics and goals, while others saw it as a long-term planning mechanism and something that was shifting the culture of the company (Nyilasy & Ots, 2017). Overall, this study showed that if designed right, integrated marketing communication could be both executed and studied in the real world.

The following section describes in detail the interviews that were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of what an integrated marketing communication system looks like in a Power Five athletics department. It delves into the structural set-up of the departments examined, the types of questions that were asked, and the nature of the conversations that were had.

CHAPTER 3. INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS

To inform the conclusions presented in this paper, interviews were conducted with nine individuals at three universities from Power Five conferences in Division I athletics. These included three senior administrators, three sports information directors, and three creatives. Three universities were selected: one from the Big 12 (hereafter called University A), one from the Big 10 (hereafter called University B), and one from the SEC (hereafter called University C). One senior administrator, one sports information director and one creative were interviewed from each school. Between the nine professionals interviewed, they had a combined experience in athletics communications of over 100 years. The three schools used different approaches to organize themselves internally, but there were some similarities. Each school had a group of 10-15 senior administrators who worked at the top of the athletics department. Their athletics communications offices each consisted of 8-10 full-time professionals, aided by a team of undergraduate help. The structure of their creative departments was similar as well, but varied a little more in size and job responsibility. Each school had a graphic design division, although titled differently at each institution, consisting of 2-6 full-time designers who worked alongside student designers and other social media producers. They also had video departments, some that oversaw cable stations in addition to their creative work. All three schools had separate creative teams for their football and men's and women's basketball teams that worked exclusively with those sports to meet their high demands. One school even had a specific position on its football staff that was completely devoted to the team's brand management.

The schools' professionals were selected for participation in the interviews due to their institutions' use of digital branding that has been recognized for exemplary work by

industry leaders such as CoSIDA, Skull Sparks, Juke. (From #smssports to..., 2016). The three institutions featured have won national titles, competed at the NCAA Final Four, produced numerous professional athletes and spearheaded national campaigns that include Heisman races (college football's highest individual award), Naismith consideration (college basketball's highest award), and human interest articles, among other efforts over the past five years. In sum, these three universities have had their brands showcased at the highest levels in front of the largest audiences in the nation. Prior to the interviews with the nine professionals, the questions were workshopped with another Power Five school to test for quality and timing of the conversations. Interviews were conducted January 14–February 20, 2019. Each interview was conducted over the phone and lasted 30-45 minutes, for more than five hours total. All nine participants were open about their work, including both positive and negative aspects of it. The conversations were casual and conversational. The questions were open-ended in nature and probed at what each school was doing to build its brand. Participants were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of their departments, how their departments were structured, and how participants have seen the culture surrounding branding and graphic design in collegiate sports change during their career. Sample questions appear in Appendix A. The interviews were then reviewed and transcribed, producing nearly 100 pages of transcripts. Based on findings from these interviews, I have compiled a list of best practices for using IMC to build a brand and drawn a portrait of different roles within a high-performing athletics communications department. A "best practice" label was given to an idea or structure within an athletics department if it was mentioned at all three schools by at least one professional. The schools all had different names, and variations to these structures and ideas, but at the core of the practice, all three schools held these five best

practices. While there were other great fixtures at the individual schools, for clerical purposes, this was the criteria that was used. Quotations will be used without names to protect the identities of those who spoke with me.

CHAPTER 4. BEST PRACTICES

Structured Communication

It should come as no surprise that all nine professionals who were interviewed mentioned that their operation runs at its best when everyone involved is communicating effectively and when information is being relayed both laterally and linearly. In order for a school's external message to be effective, the department must first look inward to see how information is being dispelled to those involved in the strategic communication process. One of the key components of integrated marketing communication is that those who are in charge of dispatching information externally also share that information internally. That way, everyone within the organization knows what message is to be conveyed to key stakeholders, effectively making those who work within that organization stakeholders, as well. This is no different in athletics departments. It is the job of sports information directors and others within the program to educate those who assist with the program, but who may not have the same contact with the team directly.

The Pod System

All three schools represented in the interviews use a pod system of communication. This looks different in practice at all three institutions but serves the same purpose of getting everyone on the same page. The senior administrator at University B said: "We have pods set up for all of our sports. The baseball pod, for example ... we have a marketing person, a video person, our SID [sports information director], and lots of times we'll have events staff and others in there. It's just kind of to get everyone on the same page and communicate all the things that we're doing and around that sport. We'll also have a director of opps

[operations] or other representative from that sport's staff." The pod system is a meeting system that connects everyone involved with the program internally (communications, marketing, creative, ticketing, facilities, coaching staff, etc.) so they can provide updates on their work and activities that affect the program. "We have those meetings, to kind of talk about the strategies or what we're trying to do forward; after that it's mostly just hammering out," said the graphic designer at University C. The graphic designer at University A said: "I do like being able to get on the same page with people once a week, especially people from different sports. Just because it can be really easy to get in your little silo during the week and not really know what else is going on and maybe stuff that we can partner on or that's just helpful to know." Nobody likes to be bogged down in long, drawn-out meetings.

However, when these meetings are run effectively, it makes everybody's job easier. People within the department better understand what the others are doing so there are fewer misunderstandings or miscommunications in the process of creating a coordinated message. Coaching staffs have a very particular set of needs they like to have met, and many times they do not know where to turn to have these requests met. With this meeting structure, everybody involved in putting on a home event or producing external communication is able to meet, collaborate, and better serve their program.

Another benefit of the pod system is transparency. A coaching staff may come to the table with a need that simply cannot be met with the school's resources. "We have an 8- to 10-person full-time staff at any time of year in [our school's video department], but our coaches think we put in Pixar down there. The things that they want, we can't always deliver," the senior administrator at University A said. In this scenario, people in this system can work through this issue to either resolve it or to come up with a compromise. The pod

system also allows for better problem solving on the fly, given the unpredictability of sports. No matter how much preparation is put in, improvisation and last-second adjustments will always be necessary. When these scenarios do arise, those who use the pod system are better equipped to handle them because if they as an individual cannot resolve the situation, they know exactly who is able to do so. Everyone in an athletics department has the same mission, and that is to shed as positive a light on their institution's brand as they can. Whether that means churning out graphics, working with the media, or working in the hospitality suites or the ticket office, everyone plays a role in furthering their team's brand. A structured system of communication makes it easy to share information.

Proximity

It is important that when possible, professionals working on your external communication efforts be housed in the same offices. When it comes to creatives (those who produce graphics and video), this becomes extremely important. While graphics and video ultimately serve separate functions, there is quite a bit of crossover between them. Graphics professionals work to create a "look" for the school or team, which video professionals will ultimately adopt into their work. When the two can easily collaborate face-to-face, it makes the work more efficient and seamless. The graphic designer at University B, said: "It's great because everyone's in the same location, so if something comes up it's really quick and easy to be able to walk over to someone's desk or shout out across the room and say, 'Hey, have you thought about this?' or 'This is coming up, what can we do for this?' It's so nice to be able to work in that collaborative work environment. It's very helpful, especially with how this industry can be, especially sometimes with things coming up, and it's nice to have everyone in the same spot to be able to collaborate." Sports information offices and

marketing departments often serve needs that involve both the graphics and video departments. Setting these two entities up in the same spot allows for one-stop shopping and encourages a concise message. Housing graphics and video in the same area also allows for resources to be shared and consolidated. When a team's content gets recognized nationally by industry leaders like Skullsparks and CoSida, it usually reflects continuity among all of the team's creative pieces (From #smssports to..., 2016). Placing graphics and video professionals side by side makes that continuity easier to achieve.

Adapting to Changes in the Profession

In the past two to three years, the emphasis on graphic design and branding has increased drastically, along with the rise in social media. "Without a doubt, in communications the ability to reach your customers on your own with social media and video web has changed what we do entirely, and I don't know if we have figured out what all we can do with it," said the sports information director at University A. The pendulum has swung in such a way that athletics departments have had to make changes to keep up with the demand. There are two approaches to this. One is by adding staff and departments to meet these needs; the other is repurposing existing resources and staff. The sweet spot appears to lie somewhere in the middle, where departments are investing in new infrastructure while also finding ways to do more with less.

Investing in Your Department

The demand for innovative graphics and original branding has become one of the great arms races in intercollegiate athletics. Positions that did not previously exist in athletics

departments are being posted on job boards daily. Administrators typically do not like to spend money. However, senior administrators who are leading these departments need to take into serious consideration how much they can afford to invest in new staff. “Truthfully, because I feel like we were behind a little bit, and we have just caught up, we kind of went from 0 to 60, so we do not really have much pushback on most things, now that we have invested quite a bit ... I think it says to me that we needed to spend some money in a lot of areas, and branding is a big one of them — to have success that would then generate revenue, which kind of replenishes itself,” said the senior administrator at University B. The senior administrator at University C said: “Within the last two years, we’ve had the growth of, I want to say—well, myself obviously. The social media position is new. Four of the videography positions are new. So just kind of making that decision within the last two years has really grown and has seen the importance of creating an impact it has on the athletics as well on the social media presence.”

Some departments are more fortunate than others are and can afford to bring on new team members without feeling the effects financially. Other departments may have to take a financial risk in bringing on new staff members. One thing is for certain: There is plenty of work to go around when it comes to creating creative content in collegiate athletics. It may seem obvious, but it is telling that every professional interviewed mentioned that the workload warrants additional staff.

Doing More with Less

Adding new full-time staff members is not always a viable option for an athletics department, so sports information offices and creative departments across the country are

filled with undergraduate students' help. Student assistants and student interns are the backbone of many athletics departments. "One thing that we do here is we rely on student-created content and relying on students that are in undergrad PR, marketing and graphic design. We continue to empower our students and seek to use them or to be the beneficiaries of their talent. As a university, that's what our mission is, to educate our students. We have to rely on that student help, so that's something here that we're very intentional about and we want to continue to rely on and expand that student-driven content, especially on the recruiting side," said the senior administrator at University B. It could pay dividends for an athletics department to restructure or refine their student help. "There's a school called (school name) and it's in a town two hours away called (town name) and they have a really good graphic design program. We're in the process right now of maybe utilizing them on some projects because we simply, as much as we have grown, it's still hard to keep up with the design needs," said the senior administrator at University A. This would create an opportunity for the athletics department to receive much-needed help in its graphics efforts while students gain valuable real-world experience.

Sports information directors have also become skilled in creative areas. Many of these professionals are tasked with filling in the blanks of graphics templates that graphic designers have created and in some cases are even creating their own graphics packages. Some graphics designers are serving as secondary photographers, while video staff are making motion graphics. Thus, some professionals are also adapting their skill sets to meet the demands of the department if hiring new staff is not an option.

Hiring Five-Tool Employees

In hiring new staff, department heads and senior administrators need to make sure the professionals they hire are multifaceted. Although it is important for professionals to have a specialization and to be focused, being able to fill in the gaps and step in to take on additional tasks is just as important. The graphic designer at University C said: “I took it upon myself to just talk with [our photographer] him, be a support photographer. So while he’s shooting in-game, I’m trying to focus more on the—I guess everything else that happens, especially in big games.” Because of the need for constant content, there is little room for error if a poor hire is made and that person is not willing to pitch in and help in other areas. “Everyone just wants things at their fingertips, so the more they’re able to help out and be a team player, be available for your co-workers when they need help on something, is obviously a great skill set to have and it’s awesome to have those people who are willing to help out when needed,” said the graphic designer at University B. Luckily for senior administrators, there is a wave of young professionals looking to enter the field of brand-building in athletics right now. It is a new trend, and young professionals are eager to dive in and make their mark. Those undergraduate students who are assisting full-time staffers and taking on roles that are giving them valuable experience will eventually graduate and become desirable candidates.

Having a Seat at the Table

Senior administrators who oversee their school’s external communication efforts meet weekly with their counterparts who oversee other aspects of the athletics department and with the athletics director. Each has a report on what their understudies are doing. These meetings are structured very similarly to the pod system that was discussed above. As the need for a more pointed focus on branding and graphic presence has grown, so

has the importance for senior administrators to relay that information to other senior staff members. “I would say it’s becoming a bigger part of our meetings, a bigger part of what we try to do—and I don’t want to say have people conform, that sounds restrictive—but a little bit more of a uniform look. That is becoming a little more front and center, I think especially as we continue to invest in video,” said the senior administrator at University A.

Aside from facility upgrades, the need to bolster the creative departments in athletics departments is an arms race in all of college athletics. If a school wishes to further its brand and to keep up with the schools they compete against on the field, their external communication efforts must be at the forefront of these conversations. The senior administrators noted they have seen a shift in recent years that show a vested interest from their senior staff members in the school’s branding initiatives. “It is huge, and it is something that has not always been a priority here. We are probably not unique in that, and I think for whatever reason in the last two to three years—branding and image, we have only [started using] those words,” the senior administrator at University B said. The emphasis on branding impacts not just the athletics department, but also the university as a whole. “There has been an appetite, especially on the university side, to maybe adapt some of the athletics’ marks and colors across the board, which I think would be a huge win for the university. I think that is a tell-tale sign that it is not just athletics people that view brand as important, but the other side of campus does,” the senior administrator at University B said. If a change is to occur in an athletics department, just like any organization, it starts at the top and is handed down. When an emphasis on branding enters the conversation in these meetings, an athletics department puts itself in a great position to further its creative services and their university as a whole.

Knowing Your Audience

One of the biggest challenges faced by external communication professionals in athletics departments is knowing the audience they are serving when creating a specific message. As the theory states, these audiences are stakeholders. Effective external communication calls for these stakeholders to be recognized—to learn their needs and how those needs will be realized. “I think you can serve the recruiting, and I think you can also reach out to potential donors in this way too. I think from our perspective it is all about mentality of storytelling. If you are telling the story of your team, you are going to be reaching out to recruits. You are going to be reaching out to your general fans; they are going to want to come see your team,” the sports information director at University A said.

Athletics serves three key external groups: recruits, fans, and donors. It can be difficult to build a message that reaches all of these stakeholders in an effective manner. The donors hold an athletics department’s future in their pockets. It is very important to keep these people happy. On the other hand, you have 15-17-year-old recruits, who are being courted by dozens of other schools, for whom your message must stand out. “In football that was probably 75 percent of my job, was just thinking about how we could aim things toward recruits,” said the graphic designer at University A. Sometimes it is possible to satisfy the needs of these two groups with one message, but other times that is not possible. The more an athletics department can overlap their message to recruits, fans, and donors, the better off it will be in creating a cohesive brand. “I think that’s one of the things our department has kind of taken a step back recently and looked at. In reality maybe that should be our focus because anything that you create from a recruiting standpoint, a fan is most likely going to like. Anything you create that might go out on social media, the chances of a recruit seeing

that are pretty high because, like I said earlier, they are on their phones all the time, they are constantly interacting with social media platforms. So, in reality I feel like everything that I do is recruiting,” the graphic designer at University B said. Echoing the importance of social media, the senior administrator at University A said: “For one, they can repurpose material that already exists. Let’s also think about our content and make sure that we’re creating things that we can repurpose, because things just in a timeline—there’s so many things out there that things will get buried in three hours and nobody will even know that it was out there. If we can create something to use at multiple times throughout the year, it’s just more beneficial and it’s going to help us to become a little more efficient.” It also looks cleaner to an outside observer when the message to donors and fans, encouraging them to buy into a program or a team, is the same message given to the recruits, who are also being asked to buy into a team or a culture.

The following section addresses the job descriptions of the professionals that were interviewed for this paper. All three positions fit into the IMC system uniquely and best practices listed above, but all serve a different function of that process.

CHAPTER 5. MAESTROS, MEDIATORS AND MAGICIANS

Senior administrators, sports information directors and graphic designers, described in this section as maestros, mediators and magicians, respectively, are all important pieces of the external communication process. Their roles and duties within the athletics department are outlined below.

The Maestros

For most organizations, it all starts at the top. It was no different for the three athletics departments interviewed. While there was some variance in the job responsibilities of each of the three senior administrators at the different universities, on a broader scale, they are in charge of all external communications. They oversee the operations of the sports information department, marketing, graphic design and creative media, the school's cable network or television arm, licensing and logos, and serve as a liaison to the campus at-large in their external communication efforts. In all three situations, they serve as their departments' voice in executive meetings with other senior staff members and sports administrators. There, they keep other department heads updated and aware of their university's branding efforts. All three noted that their report on the school's branding initiatives has become a larger topic of discussion in those meetings, whereas 10 years ago or even two to three years ago, that may have not been the case.

These professionals are in charge of allocating money in their budgets to their departments, as well as being their voice to the athletics director and leadership at large. Most of their time is spent in meetings. They meet weekly with other senior administrators and with the department heads they oversee. Here, they receive feedback that they pass down to their departments or pass along to the other senior staff and leadership. They have learned

to be malleable. With all of the changes they have seen in the past two or three years, all three observed that positions in their departments that did not exist a few years ago are now some the most imperative in their operations. They also recognized that the information their departments produce goes further than just informing. Their content affects ticket sales, recruiting, university relations, and donor support. That said, they understand what is working in their departments. Their success does not happen by accident. Each department has structures and approaches that make them successful. They also recognize things that need to be changed or added to their departments. Those strengths and weaknesses are listed below.

The Mediators

Most of the information that an athletics department puts out is controlled, strategically released, and filtered by the departments' sports information office. Sports information directors, or SIDs, wear many hats for their departments. Their main duties are sport-specific, meaning they are assigned to specific sports to carry out the media relations tasks for their teams. They travel with the teams, create media guides, arrange media availability and press conferences, perform official statistical work, and handle all of the social media for the teams they cover. These are the traditional roles of SIDs. In the last few years, however, they have seen their workloads increase. They are now tasked with using new tools, such as motion graphics and enhanced video resources, and they must help with recruiting materials. A lot of times they serve as the contact for others in the department who are trying to work with their specific teams.

SIDS are the Swiss army knives, in a sense, of athletic communications. Day to day, they check in with their coaching staffs and meet with their counterparts in marketing,

graphic design, and video. Because of their close connection to the teams they serve, they are extremely valuable in relaying messages and stories the team wants to portray to external media, as well as to those who work with the team internally, but they may not have the same organic interaction with those stakeholders that they have with the teams themselves.

Magicians

Finally, schools' graphic designers and creatives are the ones who are getting it done in the trenches. They create and build the school's brand through graphics and videos. These professionals are multifaceted. Their work goes beyond the Adobe Creative Suite. Many times, they are getting behind the camera themselves or running different social accounts. They work hand in hand with SIDs to create media. In some cases, the SID submits requests, providing the designer with the content and trusting their creative eye to package it. Other times, the graphic designer approaches the SID with ideas about what might look good on a team's social account. When these two positions are communicating well, they can put together a lot of high-quality work. They also cater to other departments such as marketing, ticketing, and development. For bigger sports, like football and basketball, graphic designers and creatives work exclusively with those teams. For other Olympic sports, departments take an all-hands-on-deck approach, where everybody pitches in on graphics and video requests. Some offices are fortunate to have large teams of graphic designers, including multiple full-time professionals and a team of interns and student designers. Others have fewer resources and have to shoulder the workload in a more resourceful manner. The three schools interviewed are exemplary in their graphic and video work and all have unique systematic approaches that make them successful.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The competitive nature of sports is one that makes collegiate athletics so tantalizing—one team or player, trying to defeat or be better than another team or player. That attitude does not stay on the field, but overflows into other aspects of an athletics department, creating an arena of professionals who strive to be the best. The same goes for schools looking to prop up their overall brand, which is truly all-encompassing of these factors. Athletics departments nationwide are making adjustments to meet the demand for creative content that bolsters their brand. There is no right or correct way of doing this. If that were the case, there would be no need for this paper. Instead, schools are developing many ways to meet their teams' need for a larger digital presence. Some of those best practices are listed in this report: structured communication, adapting to changes in the profession, hiring five-tool employees, having a seat at the table, and knowing your audience. It has worked for these three Power Five institutions and may work for other schools across the nation.

Whatever avenue a school chooses to meet the market's demand for graphic design, there must be support from the school's senior administrators in putting an emphasis on building the athletics department's brand. That is first and foremost. There needs to be an investment, whether in new resources or in a commitment to shift current resources, to improve their external communication efforts. An internal audit is needed to identify gaps or make improvements in these external communication efforts. These offices need to be staffed with multifaceted employees who can take on different roles and are willing to roll their sleeves up and put in the necessary work, which may be outside their field of expertise. With those committed staff members comes a need for cohesiveness, where everyone has bought into the message and is working and striving toward the same goal of putting the university

and its student-athletes in a positive light. Finally, a concentrated effort in strategically building a message is also key. Knowing who the stakeholders are and using that to tailor your message can go a long way in a school's external communication.

The term integrated marketing communications never came up once in any of the professionals responses, or even the word integrated for that matter. Their responses though, described what the theorists proclaimed as ideal integrated marketing communication systems. It was not that these professionals had intentionally strayed away from what the theory states, in fact it was just the opposite. Their systems followed the guidelines laid by the theorists and have ultimately led them to be industry leaders in their communication efforts. The semantics of the phrase hold true, but the term itself does not seem to exist in any of these organizations. This may lead one to believe that the term integrated marketing communications is out of date or may need to be revamped to take into account a more modern approach.

The interviews and the best practices that were derived from those interviews connect back to theory that was originally discussed in this paper. Athletics professionals find it important that everyone in their organization be on the same page, and see the importance of educating others within the organization of what their message is. Senior administrators are seeing branding and the school's external communications efforts become a more important line item in senior-level meetings. Just like the theory states, athletics professionals see that it is important to know who their audience is and structure their message to meet the needs of that audience.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Graphic Designers

Give me an overview of what your department looks like structurally (People you work with, job duties, etc.)

Obviously every day is different and unique when it comes to working in sports, but give me a rundown of some of the weekly, routine tasks that you're doing for *insert college here*

When you are creating a new design or look, what are some of the qualities you know that you have to implement into that design?

How much guidance are you given from sports information directors and department heads when designing a graphic?

In your mind, what are the benefits in building a consistent brand?

Over the past 2-3 years, how have you seen your profession change? (Adjust depending on age/experience)

Where do you fit in your team's overall brand management?

What are the biggest challenges that you see in your job?

How do you feel you benefit your athletics department the most?

What is the biggest misconception of what you do as a designer?

Sports Information Directors

Give me an overview of what your department looks like structurally (People you work with, job duties, etc.)

Obviously every day is different and unique when it comes to working in sports, but give me a rundown of some of the weekly, routine tasks that you're doing for *insert college here*

How have you seen your department adapt to the need for a larger digital presence?

How do you measure the effectiveness of the content that you are putting out?

As the gatekeeper for a lot of the information that comes out from your department, how do you ensure that information is furthering your athletics department's brand?

How has your job changed in the last 2-3 years?

What changes have you seen in the content that you put out?

What are the biggest challenges that you see in your job?

How do you feel you benefit your athletics department the most?

What's the biggest misconception of what you do as a sports information director?

Administrators

Give me an overview of what your department looks like structurally (People you work with, job duties, etc.)

Obviously every day is different and unique when it comes to working in sports, but give me a rundown of some of the weekly, routine tasks that you're doing for *insert college here*

How have you seen the importance of building your athletics brand change over the past couple years?

When your departments are running at their best, what does that look like?

What is one thing that you feel is imperative in your operation that exists in your current departmental set up?

What is something that you could change or add to your department for it to be more effective in building your brand?

How does your graphic design department fit into the overall operation of your brand management?

When did you see the shift in a need for a larger digital presence and how did you approach

implementing that into your department?

What are some of the hurdles you have to go through specifically to get resources for the departments you oversee?

How does your athletics department see the importance of branding and what resources do you put toward it?

What are the biggest challenges you face in building your brand?

What's one thing you wish people knew about what you do to build your team's brand that they may not know?