



# Communications and PR in the sport of Baseball in the United States of America

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this research was aimed at researching Communications and Public Relations (PR) within the sport of baseball in the United States of America within the Major League Baseball (MLB) organisation and its franchise operations.

The learnings from my time in the United States will benefit baseball as a whole in New Zealand, not just the NSO (Baseball New Zealand), but also the new franchise Auckland Tuatara, who play in the Australian Baseball League.

Communications and PR in any sport is one of the most important aspects of the day to day operations and “doing it right” goes a long way towards running a successful organisation.

Many of the key learnings are outlined in detail, but to summarise, proactive communication and building a trusting and strong relationship with media goes a long way to assisting an organisation to have a positive relationship with all stakeholders.

Much of this research is not solely useful in baseball and can be put into practice in any industry, good proactive communication works anywhere.

## **Introduction**

Baseball New Zealand is a growing organisation, having risen from approx 600 players and no administration/coaching in 2010, to approximately 8,700 players and a fulltime staff of 6 administrators and coaches in 2018 and is still "finding its feet" as a National Sporting Organisation (NSO). Baseball New Zealand receives little government funding (\$20,000 per year) and relies on sports betting alongside various charitable foundation funding to operate along with goodwill from many organisations to continue operations.

By being awarded this fellowship, it allowed me to operate within and view how fully resourced and operational organisations work, so I can bring those learnings and experiences back to New Zealand to assist Baseball New Zealand to grow and become one of the strongest and best run NSO's in this country and in addition assist the Auckland Tuatara to become the top baseball franchise in Australasia.

Communications is a vital cog in any organisation's operational capability as good communication not only assists the smooth running of an organisation, but advertises this to people who might not even know baseball is played here. Utilisation of websites, social media and spreading word of mouth increases the visuals and operations of an NSO.

## Key Learnings

- Why is this topic important? (relevancy/currency)

Communications and Public Relations is how organisations now ‘sell’ their product, or in this case, sport. Baseball is still a minor sport in New Zealand and very much the “little brother” to softball, which has been in existence as the predominant diamond sport in NZ for close to 100 years, therefore Baseball NZ must ‘sell’ baseball to the sporting public through good proactive communication, public relations and media content.

- What was the value overall of this experience?

The value of the experience I have gained from 10 weeks in the United States working within MLB and the (Arizona) Diamondbacks has been huge. Both are large organisations and within each, there is a true feeling amongst all I came across that each person is truly valued and a lot of this comes from the way each group communicates their message to all stakeholders. All employees that I came across felt part of something as they were kept up to date on a regular basis by positive messages coming from the higher levels of the organisation.

- What were the key questions of your project?

1. How can good communication keep up morale and productivity within an organisation?
2. How does Public Relations ensure ‘buy-in’ from stakeholders of a large organisation?

- How did you address these key questions? (method)

1. I have already put into practice many of the learnings gained from my time in both New York and Phoenix. Due to some conflicting priorities within sport in New Zealand and within the Baseball NZ organisation, there can be a

disconnect between governance, management and staff as each seeks to follow their own agendas or there can be belief that each is doing his/her best for the organisation, when in fact it can be seen as “treading on toes” or just not understanding the landscape or goals set by one of the groups involved. I have tried since my return to attempt to bring everyone together and on the “same page” by opening up communication lines and actually speaking to each other rather than the constant stream of emails. One technique I picked up from Josh Rawtich (Senior VP of Content and Communications, Arizona Diamondbacks) was a very quick and simple email to all staff with three topics of interest outlining things that are going on within the organisation. During the season, this message goes out each weekday morning, while in the off-season, it is sent each Monday. A simple way to keep all staff informed and a way to get interest going in selected events. From the staffs perspective, they feel informed and up to date on what is being done to keep their organisation moving forward.

2. With four members of their media relations team, the Arizona Diamondbacks have a great relationship with all media by not only producing regular media updates, or announcements, but by building a strong and trusting relationship with key media people. This allows the PR staff to be able to give media personnel “Off the record” information to provide background as to why or why not certain information can be made public or not. This relationship goes both ways as media will often provide information to the PR staff as a way of “heads up” or advance warning of a potentially negative situation. This type of relationship is key to keeping a positive vibe around a team or organisation that may be going through a difficult period without facing too much backlash from the public.

- What were your key learnings? Has your research influenced or addressed the questions, challenges or opportunities outlined in your topic?

Proactive communications and PR, goes a long way to ensuring an organisation is seen as a forward thinking and strong group. By keeping your message positive and putting out what some may see as potentially sensitive information shows a company or organisation believes in its staff and wants to keep them informed before they hear it from another source. Hearing sensitive or important information from an outside source creates uncertainty and un-easiness within a staff group giving some members the opportunity to create a negative atmosphere. Working with an organisation such as Major League Baseball where the sport is constantly under the microscope in the United States has shown me that a strong consistent message is hugely important to try to minimise negativity and speculation growing. Sometimes this is unavoidable as many issues within the sport are polarising and there will always be some who are not privvy to the machinations behind any decision-making process. Baseball is an institution in the US and at a time where the organisation is attempting to speed up the game, they are facing opposition to many who have followed the game for decades. The processes MLB use to make information public goes a long way to easing fans into any changes to the game by announcing any alterations a long time in advance of this happening, rather than at the last minute. This gives all stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback, which can range from player or coach/manager comments, to owners, the players Association and even fans get the opportunity to write directly to the Commissioner of Baseball Rob Manfred.

- How does your Fellowship contribute to the Trust's purpose to advance any occupation, calling, trade, business, or profession carried on in New Zealand or intended to be carried on in New Zealand; or to the maintenance of the Commonwealth as a beneficial influence in world affairs?

Many of the lessons learned during my time in the United States, are not simply limited to baseball. Good proactive communications and PR will help any organisation in New Zealand, sporting or not. I have worked in large organisations before focussing on sport

as a career and have come across good and bad communications within such workplaces. Simple updates as previously mentioned will work in any industry, in addition to a regular staff reward and recognition programme. As an example of a good communicator on the world stage, I refer to the reaction of many countries around the world surrounding our Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. She is an outstanding communicator, by her use of not only words but her ability to present a strong face in situations of adversity as well as presenting a supportive demeanour in many other situations.

- How will you use and apply your learnings?

Many of the learnings from my trip have already been put into practice in my role within Baseball New Zealand in addition to sharing those ideas and practices with colleagues. I also have contacts throughout the sporting landscape in Auckland and have discussed and shared much of what I learned while overseas. Already one colleague working in a different sport has put into practice a number of processes and ideas we have discussed.

- Where have you shared your learnings/experiences e.g. conference presentations, media coverage, talks with relevant stakeholders, etc?

I have spoken to tertiary students within the sports industry to present my findings and answer questions on how organisations such as Major League Baseball and the Arizona Diamondbacks communicate their message to all stakeholders and how they deal with adversity. I have also scheduled two further presentations with other tertiary institutions to speak to their students studying sport management.

- Who else might be interested in your learnings?

As previously mentioned, much of what I have learned can be put into practice in any area of industry and already I have spoken with a number of friends/colleagues in other

such industries (media, manufacturing, travel) and are interested in learning more to put some of the ideas and processes into practice.

- What are your recommendations and to whom should they be addressed?
  1. The strongest recommendation I can give to any person wanting to improve communication within their organisation is to be proactive whenever possible. Getting on the “front foot” (to use a cricket parlance), will show not only your staff, but all stakeholders that you are prepared to share as much about your particular industry or organisation as you can and by giving it to them in advance of any other source, will likely prevent gossip, rumours and general negativity around ‘keeping secrets’ and creating an atmosphere of trying to hide anything.
  2. Since my return from the United States, I have seen within many sporting organisations, how bad communication can affect staff morale and have a negative effect on the common purpose of the sport to promote itself. Aside from one or two sporting organisations in New Zealand, every sporting body in this country needs to take a long hard look at how they communicate their message and how they operate within the sporting landscape. Too many times we have seen National Sporting Organisations in the news for all the wrong reasons.

#### **Bullet point learnings from Major League Baseball**

- The 3 P’s – Preparation, Preparation & Preparation
- Get sustainable and strong systems in place for ALL eventualities and always have a contingency
- Play Ball/Pitch, Hit & Run programmes for all children and youth wanting an introduction to the game of baseball



### **Bullet point learnings from Arizona Diamondbacks**

- Media and/or celebrity batting practice prior to Auckland Tuatara matches
- FAWTSY - Find a Way to Say Yes.
- Weekly Communications Briefing
- Weekly media clips/stories
- Game notes for media covering Auckland Tuatara and New Zealand Diamondbacks
- Gameday event rundown/runsheet, working backwards from first pitch
- Magazine – advertising, length of mag, content, competitions etc
- 50/50 raffle – useful for Baseball New Zealand Foundation to assist young players wanting to pursue a college education while playing baseball in the United States
- Community events with schools at the ballpark
- Auckland Tuatara ticket segmentation - different season ticket packages (Avid Alan, Family Phil, Casual Cubbie, Event Emily & Millennial)

## Appendices

1. Travel blog - <http://www.baseballnewzealand.com/News/Blogs/Intern-in-the-Big-Show>
2. Arizona Diamondbacks Presentation to Unitec sports students on marketing and communication (submitted with report)

## Images



**Ian at Yankee Stadium, home of the New York Yankees**



**Ian at the offices of Major League Baseball in New York**



**Ian at Chase Field, home of the Arizona Diamondbacks**



**Ian working alongside producers at DBTV, the Arizona Diamondbacks video production team**