

Crisis Management Report on Kobe's Sexual Assault Case

Yijin Yang

Zhengzhou No.7 Middle School, Henan, China, 450012

angela@cas-harbour.org

Keywords: Celebrities, Mistakes, Apology, Forgive

Abstract: Celebrities get more attention than common people due to their outstanding appearance and some outstanding professional skills. People pay attention not only to their achievements in their fields, but also to their words and deeds in their daily life. As rapid development of technology, the speed of information transmission is also faster and faster, once the stars make mistakes, their mistakes will be exposed by the media at a very fast speed. It is very important for stars to redeem their reputation by apologizing for their mistakes. A good apology can help them win forgiveness from the public to secure their career and even make them more productive and help them build a better public image. Therefore, it is significant to research celebrity apology ways. The paper takes Kobe Bryant as an example to analyze what kind of attitude or means should be used by celebrities to get the public to forgive.

1. Introduction

A Crisis, by definition, is sudden and unexpected event, which leads to a major upset among individuals [1]. It may create adverse impact both to a person's and a company's reputation. For instance, the revenue of a company may be significantly reduced if one employee is misconduct. Celebrities should be extremely cautious about this problem as any improper management of the crisis may make the overall situation out of control. Ultimately all stakeholders may suffer from the side-effects of poor crisis management. Unfortunately, many film stars, famous athletes and other celebrities are not very cautious about crisis management such as Maradona drug abuse case[2]. Some people assume that nobody actually notices their misconduct, or the consequences cannot be disastrous. In fact, individuals, as well as companies, should carefully manage their personal and brand image, especially when facing crises. In this crisis management strategies report, the effectiveness of Kobe's strategies in regard to the sexual assault crisis will be discussed in detail.

2. Overview of Kobe's sexual assault case

In July 2003, a 19-year-old female employee reported to the police that she was sexually assaulted by Kobe Bryant, a famous basketball player from Los Angeles Lakers in the Lodge and Spa at Cordilera, Colorado[5]. Kobe admitted to a sexual encounter with Kobe Bryant but denied allegation of assault. The news that Kobe might have assaulted the girl soon spread over major media channels bot nationwide and worldwide. Without proper crisis management, it is predictable that all stakeholders including Los Angeles club, his family, NBA, and the basketball player himself, will be devastatingly affected. Kobe had to deal with this crisis directly. However, through successful crisis management strategies, Kobe Bryant manages to minimize the overall offensiveness of the incident and successfully re-branded himself after the crisis.

According to the Frankfurt School Critical theory, rapid technological development allows sports to be transformed from an amateur spirit into a highly profitable and commercialized industry[3]. In return, each year, the media industry receives millions of sports audiences and advertising revenue. As such, it is highly important and necessary for celebrity athletes to be cautious about their image and identity management as they may appear to have hundreds of thousands of fans and followers [4]. Their conduct, personalities, and words will generate a huge

impact on the fan communities.

3. Analysis of the Crisis Management Strategies of Kobe's case

3.1 Before the Crisis

By the end of the 02/03 NBA season, Kobe Bryant became one of the most successful players of the NBA at a very young age. Before 2003, he had won NBA championship in three consecutive years with Los Angeles Lakers and an all-time MVP title[6]. Before the crisis, he got married to a beautiful girl and had a self-portrait of a caring husband. The public media often praised him for clean lifestyle and positive attitude in his career.

3.2 During and after the Crisis

Without proper crisis management, at the early stage of the crisis, Kobe just denied the allegation of sexual assault. However, the physical evidence collected by police seemed to contradict what Kobe had claimed[7]. He soon realized that the incident was not just a defame case but extremely complicated. He decided to sit with his wife and held a short press conference to elaborate on the incident further to the public[8]. He admitted that he had a sexual encounter with the 19-year-old girl, but the sex was consensual. In other words, the incident was adultery but also an assault. The latter may sentence him up to a nine-year prison. This short-time press conference was the starting point of his crisis management[8]. First, it can be observed that his wife was staying with him all the time. It implied that the incident could not destroy his relationship with his wife and other family members. Another part is that he wholeheartedly regretted his adultery, which was against the social norm and ethics but he also firmly denied the assault. Sexual crime is a crime and would be unaccepted by all of his fans and supporters. He sincerely made his apology in front of the general public and begged for forgiveness. Moreover, during the conference, he chose a female attorney to clarify the incident to the public[8]. It shows that he fully respected women and their professions. He had made a mistake that many men may ever make in their life. In this way, the side-effect of the adultery, which is an unethical issue, was minimized. The sexual encounter was consensual, but it was not an assault. The level of offensiveness will be brought down effectively. Most importantly, the core part of his crisis management strategies is apology. He sincerely apologized for what he had done. He made apology to his wife and his fans. He claimed in the conference that he would be responsible for the misdeed and hoped his supporters could be forgiven him.

3.3 After the crisis

After the crisis, when the sexual assault case was officially dismissed, Kobe Bryant held another press conference in front of the general public. The legal case was settled as the accuser did not want to participate in the legal process any longer. It might be due to Kobe's publicists' pressure or other reasons. During the press, Kobe stated his apology again to the accuser, his wife, his fans and the whole NBA community[9]. He also stated that he was fully aware of how much the accuser might suffer from the media pressure. Kobe promised to financially compensate the victim and would make public apology again for the unexpected incident. Reimbursement, compensation, and public apology are all effective methods in crisis management. The joint effort would remarkably reduce the offensiveness of the sexual assault case.

4. Discussion and Recommendation

4.1 Supports from stakeholders

In crisis management, clarification, and support from key stakeholders such as family members will effectively minimize the adverse impact of a crisis. First, Kobe's wife firmly defended him. She did not only defend her husband in the conference but also stayed with him all the time during the crisis. When media agencies interviewed her about how she felt about this incident, she always stated that

her husband was innocent. She also expressed her willingness to stay with her husband and face the problem together. As such, the target audiences of this incident would feel less offended as Kobe's wife was on his side. Very similarly, Mitch Kupchak, the CEO of Los Angeles Lakers Club at that time also offered his support to the young basketball player[9]. He told the media that Kobe is "decent" and perhaps the finest young man in the team. He was very confident of his player for not committing any crimes in the incident. David Stern, the NBA Commissioner, also claimed that Kobe was innocent unless he was proven guilty[9]. Before that, Kobe should continue to play in the NBA arena.

As a matter of fact, as a public figure or celebrity, it is highly important for him or her to gain support from key stakeholders, specially family members. Target audiences may interpret from the support that the respective person is less guilty as he can be even forgiven by someone very close to him. They may start further to assume that there must be some mistaken or distorted information that leads to a complex situation. However, if a celebrity cannot gain support from his family members, especially in crises such as sexual assault, the adverse impact on the person's personal image is disastrous.

4.2 Public Apology

To make a public apology is also part of effective crisis management. Like the aforementioned, if the image and reputation of Kobe are destroyed, all the other relevant stakeholders will be adversely affected. Kobe is not only an asset to his family but also to his club and the NBA as a whole. Through prompt actions such as public apology, Kobe started to receive forgiveness from his supporters and majority of the public[10].

In the public apology, Kobe does not only make an apology to the accuser, but also to his family members, fans and supporters. Therefore, his audiences will start to believe that the celebrity is at least responsible for what he has done. As the saying goes, "Nobody's perfect." The important part is that the person is fully cognizant of his misdeed and the negative consequence. Besides, he also promises to compensate the victim. It shows that the celebrity is very responsible for the accuser.

4.3 Discredibility of the Accuser

By exposing the accuser's mistakes or disgraceful facts in the past, it will make the accusation less credible. It is immoral and illegal, but many people choose to use this method to restore their personal image. As a matter of fact, Kobe has a huge commercial value. Kobe's publicity media started to gather and reveal the personal information of the victim. Even though it was illegal, the tactic of revealing the disgraceful past of the accuser would effectively reduce the credibility of the accusation[11]. For instance, the accuser was exposed to frequently tell lies in her school. Many Kobe's supporters start to doubt what she had said about the assault. However, to expose one's personal information will violate the privacy right of American citizens. And when the personal particulars are exposed, the accuser may be frequently attacked either online or in real life by the fans of celebrity. Even though the victim may be subject to the pressure of the general public, it is still indisputable that the discredibility tactic may further create harms on the accuser.

4.4 Rebranding

Rebranding is another effective crisis management strategy. When the case was officially closed, at a personal level, it had been difficult for Kobe to be viewed as a loyal and responsible husband. In other words, his brand image was irreversibly destroyed. As such, Kobe's business partners, especially Nike, were helping him rebrand his image as a fighter with sportsmanship. With the assistance of Nike, he approached children who knew very few about his sexual assault crisis and told them how to be a professional player. When Shaquille O'Neal quit the club, he led his team to defeat Orlando Magic in the grand final of 08/09 season.

Here he intelligently uses his strong determination, leadership quality, and extraordinary skills to fully rebrand his own image. Celebrity should learn from this example. For instance, a celebrity who has an image of anti-smoking but may turn out to be a heavy smoker. Therefore, he should abandon such a brand identity as his audiences will no longer trust him.

4.5 Suggestion

Instead of frequently making apologies or attacking the accuser, the most advisable method is to keep at a very low profile. For instance, Kobe should continue to focus on playing his professional games. He also tried to minimize the media coverage until the sexual assault case was dismissed. If a celebrity frequently expresses his or her view, the mass media may interpret the words out of context through censoring or editing. The target audience may read the information totally different from what the public figure actually said in front of the media.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Kobe sets a good example of what effective crisis management is like. Defense and support from key stakeholders, public apology through holding press conferences and discredibility of the accuser are all highly effective crisis management strategies in minimizing the adverse impact of a crisis. In addition, Kobe also intends to rebrand his previous personal image. He collaborated with his business partners and carefully crafted his re-branding strategies. Instead of using the previous image as a family guy and a lawful husband, he changed his image to be a fearless fighter who could overcome all difficulties with strong determination.

The limitation is that a celebrity should advise his publicists or stakeholders not to reveal the personal and confidential information of the victim. It is extremely immoral and illegal to do so. It is true that through exposing the disgraceful past or misdeeds of the accuser, the credibility of the accusation will be lowered significantly, but it is strongly against the code of ethics of human beings and potentially violates the privacy act of the U.S

Reference

- [1] I. I. Mitroff, *Managing crises before they happen: What every executive and manager needs to know about crisis management*, AMACOM/American Management Association, 2002.
- [2] E. P. Archetti, *The spectacle of a heroic life: the case of Diego Maradona*, *Sport Stars*. New York: Routledge, pp. 161-173, 2002.
- [3] C. Corradetti, *Frankfurt school and critical theory*, Phiplpapers, 2017.
- [4] J. A. Fortunato, Public relations strategies for creating mass media content: A case study of the National Basketball Association, *Public Relations Review*, vol.26.4, pp. 481-497, 2000.
- [5] J. Markovitz, Anatomy of a spectacle: Race, gender, and memory in the Kobe Bryant rape case, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol.23.4, pp.396-418, 2006.
- [6] M. Gitlin, *Kobe Bryant: NBA Champ*, ABDO Publishing Company, 2011.
- [7] R. Franiuk, Prevalence and effects of rape myths in print journalism: The Kobe Bryant case, *Violence Against Women*, vol.14.3, pp. 287-309, 2008.
- [8] D. J. Leonard, and C. R. King, Lack of Black opps: Kobe Bryant and the difficult path of redemption, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol.35.2, pp. 209-223, 2011.
- [9] J. Kennedy, Image reparation strategies in sports: Media analysis of Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds, *The Elon Journal of undergraduate research in communications*, vol.1.1, pp.95-103,2010.
- [10] T. Weir, and B. Erik, In sexual assault cases, athletes usually walk, *USA Today*, 2003.
- [11] W. T. Coombs, Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory, *Corporate reputation review*, vol.10.3 ,pp.163-176, 2007.