

Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise
Communications Plan
Mary Krulia
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Memorandum:

To: Arthur J. Rooney II, President
cc: Daniel M. Rooney, Chairman; Arthur J. Rooney, Jr., Vice President; Charles H. Noll, Administration Advisor; Tony Quatrini, Director of Marketing; Rick Giugliano, Marketing Coordinator; Lynne Molyneaux, Marketing/Community Relations Manager; Mike Tomlin, Head Coach
From: Mary Krulia, Director of Communications
Date: May 13, 2010
Subject: Communications Strategy Proposal for the Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise

Executive Summary

Quarterback Charlie Batch is the Steelers volunteer for the United Way and started his own charity, the Best of the Batch Foundation¹. Wide Receiver Hines Ward and linebacker LaMarr Woodley participated in a bowling event to benefit the CP3 Foundation². Free Safety Ryan Clark hosted an event with the Children's Sickle Cell Foundation³. What do these players have in common other than a devotion to community outreach, especially involving children? One glimpse at sports headlines or the most recent issue of *Sports Illustrated*⁴ can answer that question: their efforts are overshadowed by the recent coverage of negative stories about players who have tarnished and outright embarrassed the Pittsburgh Steelers name.

In the wake of accusations, trades, and recruitment, the Steelers fans have spoken. Some want starting quarterback Ben Roethlisberger off of the roster, and many are happy star Wide Receiver Santonio Holmes was traded to the New York Jets for a fifth-round draft pick. As a life-long proud fan and the new Communications Director for the Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise, it is my duty to refocus and reinstate what matters most: the franchise reputation.

This Memorandum will serve as an outline for our meeting today. It will not address what I think members of franchise management should do about Big Ben in particular or individual deviant players. Nor will I postulate if Roethlisberger will turn his personal life around. I leave that business responsibility to you. What I will discuss today, however, is how to bridge the gap between the fans who threw away their number 7 jerseys and those who stand behind the

¹ NFL and United Way Partnership: Charlie Batch. http://www.liveunited.org/nfl/players_room.php

² "Ward and Woodley Hit the Lanes for Charity." Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers. 2 Feb. 2010. <http://news.steelers.com/article/117086/>

³ Varley, Teresa. "Clark Helps Out Where It Hits Home." Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers. 22 Dec. 2009. <http://www.steelers.com/community/article-1/Clark-helps-out-where-it-hits-home/9B2181BA-EB60-43F2-BE42-94906E612B8E>

⁴ McCallum, Jack. "The Hangover." *Sports Illustrated*. 10 May, 2010. 57-62.



quarterback who is suspended for the first six games. Quarterback woes are not all that ail the franchise, either. Other players have been in trouble with the law as well. In this memorandum, I will briefly discuss the current issues facing the franchise and suggest recommendations through the communications plan I devised, entitled: The Unsung Heroes Initiative. This initiative will use media outlets (both social and traditional) in cooperation with Head Coach Mike Tomlin's Zero Tolerance Policy to improve the franchise brand reputation while the team ramps up their on-field strategies for the season. The plan will remind Steelers fans and football fans alike that the Steelers remain a model team in the NFL.

I. The Steelers Franchise, Mission, Fans, and Reputation:

The Franchise

The Steelers have a rich and inspiring history. While this history lesson is unnecessary for you, Mr. Rooney, the context is important to frame my argument. Since its inception as the fifth NFL franchise in 1933, the Pittsburgh Steelers evolved into a global brand. Your family, Mr. Rooney, is behind all of this history. As you know, Art "The Chief" Rooney purchased the team, grew the franchise and, in turn, the city, into what they are today. Originally the Steelers were called the Pirates until the 1940s when Art changed the name to represent the heritage of Pittsburgh as a steel industry city. World War II brought many changes as coaches and players served in the war (for example, the Steelers merged with the Philadelphia Eagles for a brief period and were called the "Steagles"⁵).

The early years of the Steelers history involved multiple coaching changes and some winning seasons. The Steelers became a powerhouse in the NFL through the guidance of Head Coach Chuck Noll, who coached from 1969-1992. During these years Noll lead the Steelers to four Super Bowl titles (the first team to win back-to-back titles twice), legendary radio personality Myron Cope invented the renowned Terrible Towel, and the "Steel Curtain" and "Immaculate Reception" became terms synonymous with the franchise⁶. Following Noll's reign was Bill Cowher, under whom the Steelers moved to Heinz Field and received the fifth Super

⁵ "Steelers History": http://static.steelers.com/mediacontent/2009/08/24/06/Team_History_09_108704.pdf

⁶ Ibid.



Bowl title, “One for the Thumb,” in Super Bowl XL. Mike Tomlin continued this stellar reputation and made history both as the youngest coach to win a Super Bowl and his team was the first in the NFL to win six Super Bowl Championships. Art and his son Dan were both enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame along with 23 other players and coaches⁷.

Your family, Mr. Rooney, has encouraged community outreach programs and is known for creating responsible role models in players. The city of Pittsburgh owes your family a debt of gratitude for upholding values while achieving its mission.

The Mission

The Pittsburgh Steelers have a strong commitment to give back to the community each year, including the off-season. From charitable basketball games to fulfilling wishes at the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Steelers players are at the forefront of charitable giving. The mission of the Steelers Community Outreach Program is as follows:

“The Pittsburgh Steelers are proud to be a part of the western Pennsylvania community. The organization’s strong commitment to this area dates back to 1933 when Arthur J. Rooney first founded the team. Steelers chairman Dan Rooney and president Art Rooney II are known as two of the most active NFL owners and are some of Pittsburgh’s most involved executives in civic affairs. Steelers players, coaches and front office staff are involved in appearances, charitable donations and outreach programs with non-profit and community groups. It’s our way of giving back to the community that has given us so much for more than 75 years⁸!”

The Fans and the Reputation

The fans recognize when the Steelers reach out to the community. However, many Steelers fans reside outside of the Pittsburgh area, so they may be unaware of charitable activities involving players. Indeed, fans and non-fans alike would have to seek examples of charitable giving if they are not exposed on a regular basis. As the steel industry collapsed in the 1960s, the people of Pittsburgh clung to the Steelers. When people moved for job opportunities, their

⁷ “Steelers in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.” Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

<http://news.steelers.com/tradition/halloffame/>

⁸ “Steelers Community Relations Mission Statement.” Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

<http://news.steelers.com/article/80649/>



loyalty for the team moved with them. Steelers fans are a unique breed and every Steelers fan has a story. Speaking as a fan from Ohio, it is easy to find fellow Terrible Towel wavers no matter where I am. Fans have a special pride for the Steelers and often claim to “bleed black and gold⁹.” What the Unsung Heroes Initiative aims to do is to remind fans both in and out of Pittsburgh that while they may bleed black and gold, the players they revere compete with the strength of steel and have hearts of gold.

The Pittsburgh Steelers franchise is more than just a team. It is more than local fans dressing up for games on Sundays. The franchise to many involves tradition, a lifestyle unmatched by any other franchise (although they try). To outsiders this statement may be absurd, but if they were to walk into an official Steelers bar in hundreds of cities across the country, they may begin to understand¹⁰. Most importantly, though, the franchise is known for more than simply watching the game. It involves being part of the team. With every wave of a towel, fans feel like they are part of something bigger. The Steelers is a blue-collar team and is known for the relatable persona. In addition, your family, Mr. Rooney, has instilled a moral compass with the team that does not stand for elitist actions or misconduct by players.

In an article written by marketing professor Freddy Nager about the Steelers brand (pre-Roethlisberger incidents), Nager wrote that the Steelers brand is a cult brand, one that can endure a bad streak and still retain followers¹¹. Common characteristics of cult brands include icons, heroes and charismatic leaders, a value system, gatherings and places of worship, archrivals, a winning attitude no matter the record, a way of life, quality products, and consistent delivery of products¹². In the article he emphasized how the Steelers match all of these traits. He also

⁹ YouTube videos indicating fans bleed black and gold:
http://www.google.com/search?q=steelers+bleed+black+and+gold&hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&prmd=v&source=univ&tbs=vid:l&tbo=u&ei=YCbqS5qIMcGAIAfX0LiKCw&sa=X&oi=video_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CC4QqwOwAw

¹⁰ Steeler Nation list of bars: <http://www.post-gazette.com/steelnation/steelersbars.asp>

¹¹ Nager, Freddy. “Now That’s Steelers Football! A Marketing Professor’s Guide To How a Small Market Team Created a Nation.” <http://www.behindthesteelcurtain.com/2010/5/5/1458772/now-thats-steelers-football-a>

¹² Ibid.



accentuated how your family established a value system, dedicated to the blue-collar workers in the city, that has created a legacy of loyalty to fans.

II. Statement of Challenge

The value system places a burden on the franchise, however, when disorderly players taint the Steelers name with their actions. Namely, two-time Super Bowl winning Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was accused of sexual assault against a 20-year old in Milledgeville, GA on March 5. Even though the charges were dropped in Roethlisberger's current scandal, this was not Big Ben's first offense displaying actions against NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's player conduct policy. In addition, Roethlisberger has a reputation for being crude, arrogant, disrespectful, and elitist when he goes out in public. While Ben Roethlisberger is in the spotlight, he is not the only team member to make headlines. Other players have had mishaps with the law. In an article from the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, over the past two years the franchise has had to deal with the following off-the-field incidents:

- 1) Receiver Cedrick Wilson arrested on a charge of domestic abuse. Wilson was released soon after;
- 2) Linebacker James Harrison, charged with domestic abuse. The charge was later dropped;
- 3) Running back Najeh Davenport, found not guilty of domestic abuse, child endangerment and unlawful restraint charges in Ohio;
- 4) Wide Receiver Santonio Holmes, charged with having three marijuana-filled cigars in his vehicle. The charge was later dropped;
- 5) Kicker Jeff Reed, charged with disorderly conduct and criminal mischief after police said he damaged a paper towel dispenser and harassed employees at a Sheetz convenience store. He pleaded guilty and was fined \$543.50; and
- 6) Roethlisberger, accused in a civil suit by a Nevada woman of sexually assaulting her. The case is still pending¹³.

The NFL Player Conduct Policy states that players who are involved in various acts of misconduct, including domestic violence or sex offenses are not tolerated¹⁴. Players engaging in

¹³ Finder, Chuck. "Damage Control Is the Next Step for Steelers." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* Online. 13 Apr. 2010. <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10103/1049933-66.stm>

¹⁴ "NFL Personal Conduct Policy." ESPN.com. 13 Mar. 2007. <http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=2798214>



criminal activity will have to undergo counseling or pay fines, depending on the offense.

Roethlisberger, while not charged in court, remains guilty of misconduct in the league. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell determined that discipline was necessary and suspended Big Ben for six games without pay. In a letter to Roethlisberger Goodell wrote:

“My decision today is not based on a finding that you violated Georgia law, or on a conclusion that differs from that of the local prosecutor. That said, you are held to a higher standard as an NFL player, and there is nothing about your conduct in Milledgeville that can remotely be described as admirable, responsible, or consistent with either the values of the league or the expectations of our fans¹⁵.”

Goodell’s actions sparked Coach Tomlin to enforce the Zero Tolerance Policy. Coach Tomlin basically told the team before a workout that if off-the-field conduct compromised the franchise reputation and players’ abilities to play well, the player(s) involved would be kicked off of the team or traded¹⁶.

Regardless of policies and efforts by the NFL and the franchise, Roethlisberger’s name is not in good standing. From rapper Eminem mentioning Roethlisberger in a song titled “Despicable¹⁷,” to Roethlisberger’s name being replaced by NHL Hall of Famer Mario Lemieux at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium¹⁸, to Roethlisberger jerseys hidden in storage at sports stores¹⁹, it is clear something must be done to change Big Ben’s image and to reinstate the solid Steelers name with positive connotations. Roethlisberger’s image will improve with a change in actions off of the football field. As he works to regain trust from the public, the Steelers also need the public to trust that we remain a reputable organization. In the next section, I will

¹⁵ “Roethlisberger Suspended for 6 Games Without Pay.” 21 Apr. 2010.

<http://www.myfoxdc.com/dpp/sports/reports-roethlisberger-suspended-4-6-games-042110>

¹⁶ Cooper, JJ. “Steelers Adopt Zero Tolerance Policy.” 19 Apr. 2010. <http://nfl.fanhouse.com/2010/04/19/steelers-adopt-zero-tolerance-policy/>

¹⁷ “Eminem Raps About Roethlisberger.” ESPN.com. 29 Apr. 2010.

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=5149507>

¹⁸ “Lemieux Replaces Roethlisberger At Zoo.” ESPN.com 23 Apr. 2010.

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=5128828>

¹⁹ McCallum, 62.



discuss The Unsung Heroes Initiative. It will outline ways in which the Steelers franchise can work toward consistent messages regarding disciplinary actions, and focus on partnerships with sponsors and media outlets to broadcast community outreach.

III. Communications Plan: The Unsung Heroes Initiative

In this section, I will describe the Unsung Heroes Initiative. Each unsung hero is a player who contributes to the community and whose efforts often go unnoticed. This communications plan will address two objectives, promote four messages, and focus on specific audiences through various outlets and modalities. President Rooney, your recent letter to fans was a step in the right direction of maintaining the image and upholding high standards²⁰. This plan will be a team effort as a franchise to maintain the franchise values. The initiative will conclude with implementation tactics and duties for members of the franchise.

Objectives

The Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise must implement The Unsung Heroes Initiative to achieve the following two goals. The first is to address fan concerns regarding disciplinary actions. The second is to refocus the franchise reputation to reflect high standards and its role in the Pittsburgh community.

Messages

The Steelers must follow the Unsung Heroes Initiative by unwaveringly promoting the following four messages:

- 1) The Pittsburgh Steelers have a zero tolerance policy for misconduct
- 2) The Pittsburgh Steelers value the fans of “Steeler Nation”
- 3) The Pittsburgh Steelers are influential members of the community and therefore play a role in promoting community outreach programs
- 4) The Pittsburgh Steelers team members are upstanding individuals who donate their time out of pride for the franchise

Audiences

The Unsung Heroes Initiative must make a conscious effort to address internal and

²⁰ Loede, Matt. “Rooney Responds in a Letter to Fans Over the Anger With Roethlisberger.” Steelersgab Blog. 9 May 2010. <http://www.steelersgab.com/2010/05/09/rooney-responds-in-a-letter-to-fans-over-the-anger-with-roethlisberger/>



external audiences to effectively transmit the above objectives and messages. Specifically, the internal audience consists of staff and players who must believe in the initiative and implement it. The external audiences include fans that may question the team reputation and lose faith in the organization, sponsors that release endorsements due to recent issues with players, shareholders who believe in the franchise, institutional investors who have much to lose in this unsteady financial climate, and fans of other teams (or people who dislike sports in general) who will use the recent negative news to reinforce arguments against professional athletes.

Media

The Media Relations department is consistent and transparent when it addresses both internal and external audiences. The recent focus, however, has been damage control. The franchise will partner in this initiative with broadcast media to have regular stories about the initiative programs to shine a positive light on the franchise. Members from the franchise will also host chats using social media platforms. The Unsung Heroes Initiative must therefore match the message to the appropriate mediums in a timely manner.

Modalities: Main Methods of Implementation

The Unsung Heroes Initiative will focus its efforts for reinstating the honorable Steelers reputation in the following four ways:

- 1) Promote players as unsung heroes and market these projects in a strategic manner
- 2) Engage players in social media
- 3) Engage employees in online discussion with fans
- 4) Research and analyze efforts

Desired Outcome

The short-term goal in this initiative is to refocus media attention away from Roethlisberger's and other teammates' mishaps. Instead, the Unsung Heroes Initiative aims to drive positive coverage on what players do for the city of Pittsburgh. This plan will prove that our players are not only leaders, but are also role models.

The long-term goal is that, through our efforts, the Steelers will be seen as the most reputable franchise both on and off of the field. For current and especially die-hard long-term



fans, this is not a problem. Fans will be devoted to the Steelers with or without Roethlisberger as the quarterback. For wavering or new fans, however, this is key to maintaining their loyalty.

Timeline

Steelers players pride themselves in teamwork. The Unsung Heroes Initiative is no exception. Everyone in the franchise will play an integral role in implementation. With a collaborative effort, the short-term goal can be accomplished by the start of the season and the long-term goal can be fulfilled throughout the course of the 2010-2011 season and the next off-season. Online discussion with fans will last for one hour once a month. Each player deemed an unsung hero would be marketed in a strategic manner (discussed in detail in the next section). Players can immediately start engaging with fans in social media once we set up a social media policy. And finally, researching efforts must be complete within 30 days, accompanied with a report to me. Once my communications team and I assess each report we can determine the success of each project for further use.

IV. Implementation

Step One: Promote

The first step of The Unsung Heroes Initiative is to promote players as unsung heroes and market these projects in a strategic manner. Players who currently have a charity or a relationship with non-profit organizations will be highlighted on the website Home page. I will speak to the Webmaster so that the player's picture with a short description will be on the sidebar. Each month a new hero will be announced. Aside from the website, the heroes will be announced in broadcast media through our partnerships with local radio and television stations. Finally, each month when a new hero is announced, our social media sites will also include an announcement, directing viewers to visit the Steelers website.

As Roethlisberger works to improve his image and regain trust, his teammates must also contribute in outreach programs to improve the franchise reputation. Players who are currently uninvolved or rarely participate in community outreach should be encouraged in a letter by franchise leadership to contribute in charitable programs. There are currently over 30 Steelers-



sponsored community outreach programs, so players have a variety of options²¹. In a recent report by FoxSports.com, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Ronald McDonald House stated that Roethlisberger is welcome to continue volunteering with their organizations²². Teammates should join Roethlisberger when he volunteers to show the community that they work well as a team both on and off of the field.

Step Two: Engage Players in Social Media

The second step of The Unsung Heroes Initiative is to engage players in social media. My communications team will market the opportunity to players to engage with fans themselves. The current Steelers Facebook page is very active, but this initiative will ask players to participate as well²³. My team will develop an official Twitter profile and post the information on the website. Player involvement on Twitter will be beneficial for the initiative. For example, Hines Ward is currently active on Twitter with nearly 14,000 followers of his personal profile. His most recent tweet even encourages participation for his charity weekend: “Corporations we need your help during my Charity Weekend. Your Corporate Sponsorship would help us²⁴.” This is admirable of Ward and should be a model for our current initiative. We will also encourage willing players to upload videos from practices or pre-game activities to a Steelers YouTube channel or pictures to the Flickr account.

In addition to players having a personal social media presence, there should be links on the website to “friend” or “follow” players with personal accounts. If you agree to this, Mr. Rooney, I think you will see an increase in not only fan loyalty and pride, but also a national recognition that the Steelers franchise is reputable and respected in the community. There will be, of course, an ethics policy established for players’ social media use, especially since we are placing the Steelers name with it. The ethics policy will be a topic of another memo.

²¹ “Community Outreach Programs.” Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

<http://prod.www.steelers.clubs.nfl.com/community/community-outreach-programs.html>

²² Marvez, Alex. “Two Local Charities Stick by Steelers QB Roethlisberger.” 3 May 2010.

<http://msn.foxsports.com/nfl/story/marvez-local-charities-stick-by-big-ben-050310>

²³ The Steelers Official Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/steelers?v=wall>

²⁴ Hines Ward Personal Twitter Profile: <http://twitter.com/HWmvp86>



The franchise can use social media for broadcasting our messages to our advantage in three ways. First, before our initiative, we will announce the initiative through all available mediums. Second, during our initiative, we will update fans and encourage more involvement online. Finally, we will thank those involved and promise to continue our efforts of community outreach.

Step Three: Engage Fans in Online Discussions

The third step of The Unsung Heroes Initiative is to engage employees in online discussion with fans. The current Message Boards under the “Fan Zone” section of the website will remain, but this initiative will feature a live chat once a month²⁵. My communications team can ask interested employees to volunteer to participate in online chats and train them for various scenarios, especially regarding disciplinary actions. We can steer conversation in these chats with consistent messages and produce valuable information. Each discussion will last one hour once a month using the official Steelers website for the discussion. My team will work to market the chats in social media and promote them prominently on the website to remind fans that the Steelers are there for them and want to hear what they have to say. For example, the website will have a tab called “Discussion.” When visitors click on the tab there will be a message saying, “Welcome to the Official Steelers chat! Make sure to check back every month to talk with members of the franchise. Steeler Nation, we want to hear from you!” The discussions will vary each month depending on team activity. The employees engaging in the conversations can steer fans to resources and information while emphasizing the four messages listed above.

Step Four: Research and Analyze Results

Finally, the fourth step is to research and analyze efforts of The Unsung Heroes Initiative. The Research and Development division of the franchise will use fan feedback, online analytic materials, and public response. With the ideas and feedback from online discussions, we can accurately assess the communications plan for future endeavors. Each quarter, Research and

²⁵ Steelers Message Board. Official Site of the Pittsburgh Steelers. <http://news.steelers.com/fanzone/mboard/>



Development will write a report for my communications team and we will meet to discuss results.

Preventive Measures

One question you may ask is what the franchise will do if another player is accused of or commits a crime. With our Unsung Heroes Initiative in place, the franchise can address the issue and then move on with the positive aspects of the franchise. If a situation arises, the Steelers must remember to take responsibility and take control by applying the three A’s: admitting fault, apologizing, and addressing the issue – all in a timely manner. Once the issue is addressed the franchise can continue with the initiative by emphasizing our messages and our value system.

Success Metrics

Based on the outline for The Unsung Heroes Initiative, metrics are necessary to measure success and to determine what efforts should be continued in the future. Below is a table that summarizes the metrics in The Unsung Heroes Initiative:

Output Based Metrics	Impact Based Metrics	Outcome Based Metrics
<i>Measures Levels of Franchise Communication Activity</i>	<i>Measures Changes in Stakeholder Awareness, understanding or attitude</i>	<i>Measures changes in stakeholder behavior</i>
Employee feedback	Online forums	Increased appreciation for valuing opinions
Fan feedback	Online forums	Increased appreciation for fostering relationships
Research and Development	Meetings and reports	Analyze feedback
Report	Follow-up memo and meeting	Address findings in research and development initiatives
Implement new ideas from fans	If financially and collectively viable, ideas could implemented and announced online	Increase in brand reputation, search engine rankings, revenue, and maintain leadership in NFL



V. Summary:

This memorandum concludes with a summary of The Unsung Heroes Initiative. I look forward to discussing this communications plan in our meeting and implementing it as soon as possible.

Problem:

Ben Roethlisberger and other players' off-the-field actions are damaging the Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise reputation.

Plan:

The Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise must use a team effort to collaborate leadership, customer service, communications and research and development departments to implement The Unsung Heroes Initiative and promote our positive brand with effective and consistent messages.

Methods:

1. Promote players as unsung heroes and market these projects in a strategic manner
2. Engage players in social media
3. Engage employees in online discussion with fans
4. Research and analyze efforts

Implementation:

1. Take responsibility and take control
2. Consider new options and ideas from fan feedback
3. Research options
4. Use social media to our advantage

Thank you for reading, President Rooney. It is my duty to uphold and communicate the reputation of the Steelers franchise. Through the efforts of The Unsung Heroes Initiative we can achieve this goal. I look forward to our meeting today and our continued communication.

Mary Krulia
Director of Communications