

2019 Annual AVAP Conference
Crisis Communications Panel Notes
August 1, 2019

Background

- Comms team learned Michael Vick was being inducted into the Hall of Fame at Virginia Tech after their athletics team issued a news release in 2017.
 - Athletics reasoning for doing so:
 - Vick was arguably the greatest student athlete they had seen
 - Vick put their athletics program on the map, arrived in 1998 and transformed a dormant program into team playing for national championship in 1999
 - From there, Vick went on to sign 100 million dollar contract with Atlanta Falcons, was a well-known NFL player
 - Concerns from veterinary school/animal advocates:
 - Was arrested in 2007 after pleading guilty for his involvement in a dog fighting ring and related animal abuse
 - Spent 21 months in federal prison

Positive reactions

- Sports fans, undergrads, etc., felt it was long overdue and were excited by the news
 - These individuals were less concerned with or unaware of the charges, many felt he had served his time for the crime

Negative reactions

- Members of the veterinary community, animal welfare groups such as PETA, veterinary college alumni, etc., were vocal with their concerns that someone who had been accused of and served time for animal abuse related charges would be given this honor by the University.
 - Most of these concerns were voiced on Facebook/social media, though some came in through phone and email
 - At the height of the news, were receiving around 35 messages per day
 - Typical average 2-3 per day as things slowed down
 - Some donors/alumni said they'd never give again

Managing the issue

- Initially spent time in listening mode, monitoring the conversation and negative responses
 - For people reaching out via email/phone they let them know they were heard, thanking them for their feedback
 - University Relations had access to forward facing donor database
 - On social media, kept track of and identified who people were who were expressing concerns and what audience they belonged to

- Social media provided these individuals a platform to voice their opinions
 - Allowed people to post on social media, provided they followed guidelines of the school channels
 - I.e., hid the comments that were posted on old/irrelevant posts
- Kept Dean well-informed as all of this was unfolding; assistant dean was having daily conversations with the Dean
- Given the extent of the negative commentary within the alumni base and veterinary and animal welfare communities, the communications team received clearance to have the Dean of College of Veterinary Medicine issue a message to these audiences within a week or so of the initial news breaking.
 - Dean drafted a personalized message, which was approved by University Relations
 - Message was posted (with the Dean's name attached) on the College of Veterinary Medicine's Facebook page
 - The tone of the message distanced the College of Veterinary Medicine from the University's decision and was bold—noting unequivocal disagreement with the decision and upholding the school's commitment to the welfare and well-being of animals
 - **This message was not used for media**
- For the purposes of responding to media inquiries, University Relations crafted a short statement embracing the differences of opinion and noting that the University as a whole believed its community was large enough to uphold these differences.
 - This message was issued only to media centrally by University Relations
- An email was sent to college community directing them to appropriate media contacts if they were asked to comment
- A student protest event was posted on social media
 - Leadership worked with organizers who just wanted a peaceful protest
 - Public safety was in the loop
 - Actual attendance of the event was much smaller than the hundreds of people who RSVPed and thousands of people who said they were interested in the event on Facebook
 - 100 people
 - Covered by local media

End result

- While advice from the College of Veterinary Medicine would have been not to proceed with this award for Michael Vick, the transparency and ability to be authentic with key constituents and audiences was appreciated by these individuals.
- Despite some initial comments from alumni/donors of cutting ties or funding did not decrease, and in fact seemed to increase, potentially from the exercise in transparency.

Other crisis comms issues and related policies at Virginia Tech

- Other tricky topics that can come with various constituents and general public
 - Animal research, food production animals, etc.
- VT profile picture changed to new logo was actually a more reacted to post than this news.
- College of Veterinary Medicine doesn't typically post statements from the dean on social media. VT typically would share President's messages on Facebook.