Organizational Communication in the WNBA

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There are over 42,000 organizations in the world, each of which has their own style and practice of organization communication. Out of all those organizations, the one that I chose as the subject of my research paper is the Women’s National Basketball Association, better known as the WNBA. Throughout this paper, I will provide a brief history of the WNBA, patterns that I have identified regarding communication in the WNBA, connections between communication in the WNBA and the course content, some problems I identified regarding the communication in the WNBA, and my recommendations for fixing those problems.

The concept for the Women’s National Basketball Association was officially approved on April 24, 1996, to begin play in June of 1997. Before the league began its first season, eight teams were announced and split into two conferences, the Eastern Conference, and the Western Conference. That first season, 50 million fans watched the WNBA teams play via three different networks. Four years later, nearly 60 million fans over 167 countries tuned in to watch the WNBA on ESPN2, NBC, ESPN, and Lifetime. Over time, the WNBA has expanded to 16 teams and has continued to make improvements to make the game more interesting to watch (History of the WNBA, 2002).

The subject of my critique is the communication process of the WNBA and how they communicate with their fans. Since the inception of the WNBA in 1997, the league and the teams as organizations, as well as the individual coaches and players, have worked to ensure that the communication methods they use encourage fan and community engagement, increase game attendance, and reinforce a positive image for the league (Zhang et al., 2010). This is typically done through communications such announcements sent out via email, text, and the WNBA app. It can also be done through social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, X, and Facebook (Shreffler, Hancock, Schmidt, 2015). Most prominently, however, this communication is done through live pre-game and post-game broadcasting done on television and streaming sites. This live communication can be done via interviews with players and coaches, storytelling to help fans learn more about certain players or coaches, and general information about the league and teams (Pegoraro, Ann, et al., 2021).

The most prominent pattern that I identified when researching communication within the WNBA is that most of the communication regarding the games is done through pre-game and post-game broadcasting. This includes anything from interviews and commentary to press conferences with players and coaches. Another pattern I noticed on social media was that posts that feature well-known public figures and that highlight important events for the organization tend to generate more likes and comments than other, more generic posts.

In the following section, I will connect content that has been discussed in class on organizational communication to the communication that is performed by the WNBA. The first connection to the course content comes from Chapter 2 of Sexual Harassment In Organizational Culture by Debbie S. Dougherty (2023) which talks about definitions related to organizational communication, specifically the definition for messages. Dougherty defines messages as, “…
communication designed to produce a desired change in an individual,” (p. 28). One of the most important aspects of communication for the WNBA is the messages that they send via social media and their website. According to Dougherty, “… messages are intended to persuade people,” (p. 28). Because most of their communication with their fans is written, it is important that the messages they send translate well to all audiences who could potentially read the messages. The WNBA does a great job focusing their messages on the audience, and addressing three concerns that need to be, “… considered when crafting messages – context, cultural sensitivity, and self-efficacy, (pp. 28-29).

The second connection to the course content that I observed is the Mary Poppins version of organizational culture from Dougherty (p. 63). The Mary Poppins’ Version of Organization Culture is the idea that an organization is committed to being a positive organization where the organization culture is encouraging and supportive (p. 64). While I cannot speak for communication within the organization itself, the communication that is received by fans of the WNBA is that the organization is positive and encouraging. In addition to that, the WNBA uses their social media platforms to post encouraging and support messages directed to their players, coaches, staff, and all those who are involved in the organization (Pegoraro, 2021).

The third connection that I made was with the Transformational Model of Organizational Culture (Trans-MOC) from Dougherty chapter 4 (p. 75). When viewing the Trans-MOC model, the connection can be made that the WNBA has its own Trans-MOC model within the organization itself. Beginning in the center of the Trans-MOC model is the ‘Core Organization Meanings’ (p. 75). The WNBA has listed on their website the four core values (meanings) of the organization: lead with integrity, be the fan, create community, and innovate with intention (www.wnba.com). From these core values, the WNBA has created their meaningful organizational values, the second tier on the Trans-MOC model (p. 75). The meaning of organization values is a term that can also be related to their mission statement, which for the WNBA reads, “Inspire and connect people everywhere through the power of basketball” (www.wnba.com). The third tier of the Trans-MOC model is organizational enactment, or the way that the WNBA communicated with their fans through the media. The fourth, and outermost tier of the Trans-MOC model is the idea of larger cultural meanings. The larger cultural meaning of the WNBA is loosely tied to the fan base and includes the demographics of fans and how they receive the communications from the WNBA, both the message and the platform they receive from (p. 77). The communication done by the WNBA is extremely extensive, but these three connections to the course content are the most prominent and relevant.

There are some problems with the communication methods that the WNBA chooses to use with fans. The first, and possibly most prominent, issue is that there are many fans who don’t have access to certain platforms, apps, broadcasting stations or streaming services to receive communication from the league. This is an issue because in order for fans to receive messages from the WNBA, they need to have access to the messages in some form. Another problem that the WNBA has experience is engagement. When using social media, the communication is almost always contingent on engagement. Engagement can be categorized through many different things, from how many fans like a post to how long fans spend watching videos. An example of this is the function on Instagram that allows the owner of an account to access analytics regarding their account. These analytics report on everything from the number of new
accounts reached to any sort of changes in the number of viewers on a picture or video. As mentioned previously, the WNBA relies on written messages through social media to connect with their fans, so WNBA communication with fans is limited by access to technology as well as the interaction and engagement fans have their content and messages.

Throughout the course of this paper, I have discussed the history of the WNBA, patterns regarding the communication that the organization has with its fans and viewers specifically through social media, how content from the course Organizational Communication Theory and Research relates to the WNBA, and certain issues that could be associated with the way the WNBA chooses to communicate with its fans. In this section, I will provide some recommendations for how I believe the WNBA could improve their organizational communication.

The first improvement I believe the WNBA could make is regarding the content that the organization posts on TikTok. When looking at the TikTok account for the WNBA, it is clear that the content fans find most engaging is the funny, realistic and relatable content. The videos that the WNBA posts with highlights and press conference clips do get views, but what is most watched is the videos of players having fun on the bench or being mic’d up during a game or a practice. With that being said, my recommendation for improved communication is using the WNBA TikTok platform to post their more funny and entertaining content because that is that fans will watch and engage with when they are scrolling on the app.

Another recommendation that I believe is important to point out would impact the WNBA website. When looking at the website, there are a lot of stories and information, but what I don’t see is how to watch the game. If the WNBA wants more people to watch and stream the games, they need to make is more accessible for fans to find out how to purchase the streaming services or learn where they can watch. My suggestion would be to put banners and links on the home page of the website that will take fans to the streaming sites or the information for where they can watch WNBA matchups. These banners and links can be small or large, but they should be designed to draw attention and be easy to read.

These two recommendations that I have provided would help some of the WNBA’s communication problems that were pointed out earlier regarding access and engagement. With these recommendations, fans would be more engaged in the content the organization is putting out on TikTok which would increase interaction with the messages the organization is sending. There would also be an increase in fans who watch games because they would have easier access to the streaming services or channels to do so.

Over the course of this paper, I have provided a detailed overview regarding many aspects of communication in the WNBA. Within those aspects of communication, I identified a few major problems with the organization’s communication and provided a few ideas for how to fix those problems. The WNBA is a large organization, and the communication is extremely complex and extensive, but it is also important to focus on one aspect of that communication. This paper is an example of focusing on one aspect of communication within a larger organization.
WORKS CITED


