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Sports Public Relations

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CHAPTER 42

Sport Public Relations

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Sport public relations has myriad opportunities for scholars, educators, and practitioners. The growth in professional and university sports in the United States and around the world has resulted in many live and mediated viewing options for fans. The demand by fans for sport information has resulted in increased media coverage. Burton and Howard (1999) bluntly stated, "Professional sports command constant media and consumer attention" (p. 44).

Consequently, increased media coverage has helped generate additional revenue for sport organizations that supplements ticket and merchandise sales. In 2005, ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) signed an 8-year contract with the National Football League (NFL) to televise Monday Night Football at the cost of $1.1 billion per year. The NFL maintains separate contracts with CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), FOX, and NBC (National Broadcasting Company) for other games and provides game coverage and analysis through its league-owned channel NFL Network.

Television programming, which covers all the major sports in the United States, provides one of a number of media revenue streams for sport

organizations. Major League Baseball created an advanced media division to manage the sport's digital assets in 2000. Seven years later it generated close to $400 million in revenue that was shared equally among the league's 30 teams (Torre & Verducci, 2009). Satellite television and radio produced additional revenue.

University sport teams generate significant revenues of their own. In addition to media broadcast contracts, universities have focused on stadium expansions, premium seating options, merchandise sales, and lucrative sponsorship deals. In college football, this resulted in 10 different teams earning at least $45 million in 2005 (Schwartz, 2007). *Forbes*'s 2009 list of the most valuable men's college basketball teams shows that 8 of the top-10 most valuable teams generated more than $10 million in revenue the previous season (Schwartz, 2009).

In these environments, sport public relations practitioners fill roles dealing with media relations, new media, Web management and design, print publication development, community relations, promotion, special event planning, integrated communication, and sport marketing. This chapter will review approaches to university education in sport public relations and discuss research

opportunities for scholars in the field before concluding with a discussion on research outlets.

Education in Sport Public Relations

Public relations educators have recognized the student interest in sport public relations and its career options. Recent editions of popular undergraduate public relations textbooks discuss the topic from a variety of perspectives. Wilcox and Cameron (2009) included an entertainment, sport, and travel chapter that briefly discusses sport publicity and sponsorship. Similarly, Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2007) included sport in their description of specialization areas within public relations. Although Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) do not include a specific section on sport public relations, sport examples are provided to illustrate concepts in the textbook (e.g., China's 2008 Olympic bid, the community relations activities by the Chicago Bulls).

Beyond these references in textbooks, however, Neupauer (2001), when discussing needs in the university sports information field, wrote that "educators, scholars, athletic directors, and sports information directors (SIDs) need to make sure that those aspiring to enter the field are prepared to handle the job by providing appropriate coursework and training" (p. 554). The comment applies to the preparation for public relations employment at a professional sport level as well. Universities have taken a variety of approaches in response.

Through curriculum changes, some universities now offer individual courses exclusively focused on sport public relations, sport information, and sport communication. Other universities have taken it a step further by creating entire programs in sport public relations. Northern Michigan University created an entertainment and sport major that is designed to follow the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) curriculum guidelines. The public relations faculty developed the program and teach the courses.

Created in 2003, the major attracts 40 students annually to its introductory courses (K. Rybacki, personal communication, August 26, 2009).

An alternative approach has been taken by universities such as the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill and Bradley University. These universities include sport public relations education as a part of their integrated programs. UNC's Sport Communication Program, started in 2002, offers a variety of courses, including sport communication, ethical issues in sport communication, and sport marketing and advertising. Bradley's Sport Communication Program is designed to familiarize students with sport journalism, promotion and publicity, production and performance, and sport media relations.

While these examples show that some university public relations departments are capitalizing on the demand for specialized sport public relations education, at other universities this need is being fulfilled by other academic departments. For example, the University of Michigan offers a sport management program that is housed in its School of Kinesiology. This program includes courses designed to familiarize students with organizational strategy and behavior, promotion and marketing, media, and research methods. In addition to preparing students for management positions in sport, it also educates them for positions in sport information and communication. Similarly, Indiana University offers a sport marketing and management program through its Department of Kinesiology that offers courses in sport promotion and public relations and sport communication. Additionally, the department partners with the university's business school for integrated course offerings.

The universities and programs described here are not intended to provide a comprehensive list of sport public relations education. Indeed, many more universities in the United States offer similar programs. Instead, the examples simply show the diverse approaches being taken to fill educational needs in this specialized area and are intended to raise awareness of the opportunities.

Within the public relations field, university administrators and educators will have to decide if their institution will develop courses and programs to address the sport public relations needs. If not, these educational opportunities are likely to be met with increasing frequency by kinesiology, marketing, and management departments.

Research in Sport Public Relations

Academic research exploring sport public relations topics is relatively limited but appears to be increasing as scholars in public relations and related disciplines have published a variety of related studies in academic journals (e.g., Desmarais & Bruce, 2008; Fortunato, 2000; Funk & Pritchard, 2006; Hardin & McClung, 2002; L'Etang, 2006; McCleneghan, 1995; Neupauer, 1999; Stoldt, Miller, & Comfort, 2001; Woo, An, & Cho, 2008). This section reviews a number of the pertinent articles that have contributed to our understanding of the work of sport public relations practitioners.

Online survey research by Hardin and McClung (2002) gathered demographic information about college sports information directors (SIDs)—the term often used to describe sport public relations practitioners at a college or university level—and solicited advice from respondents for students interested in the field. Unlike the overall public relations field that is about 70% female (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009), results show that males make up a majority (89%) of the practicing SIDs. Although random sampling was not used in the survey, these numbers are generally consistent with earlier research (McCleneghan, 1995; Neupauer, 1999).

The typical SID has 16.81 years of experience in the sports field, has been at his or her current institution for nearly 12 years, has a bachelor's degree in journalism/public relations or a related field, and is a member of the College Sports Information Directors Association (CoSIDA). More than 60% make at least $45,000 per year, although 18% make less than $35,000.

Responses were solicited to the following open-ended question: "What would you tell a current college student who wants to enter the sports information/media relations profession?" The qualitative responses were coded and revealed the following general themes:

> Get as much writing experience as possible, gain as much experience as possible as an undergraduate, be prepared to work long hours, and plan on a career with little pay and little appreciation, but also plan on it being a lot of fun. (Hardin & McClung, 2002, p. 38)

McCleneghan (1995) used a cluster sampling method to survey SIDs from regional areas around the United States. Demographic information of survey participants was similar to that reported by Hardin and McClung (2002). The top external publics SIDs work with most frequently include members of the media at radio stations, TV stations, and newspapers. Qualitative open-ended questions were used to help describe the overall work environment and job responsibilities. The most common response to the question "What takes up most of the SID's time during the week?" was administrative duties (55%).

Neupauer (1999) surveyed SIDs in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States using a purposive sample to determine if communication trait differences existed among practitioners employed at large and small universities. No significant differences were found among respondents. While the study contributes to the development of an SID profile, Neupauer added that "the next generation of SID research needs to clearly define the Sports Information Director's role within all intercollegiate athletic environments" (p. 169).

Stoldt et al. (2001) surveyed athletic directors at NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division I, II, and III institutions to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the work done by SIDs. Results showed that a majority of the SIDs (92.3%) are perceived to primarily fill technical roles. The athletic directors' highest

levels of confidence in the sport information staff's ability to perform public relations tasks were on producing sport information materials, working with coaches and athletes, maintaining media contacts, and coordinating special events. Conversely, the lowest levels of confidence were for conducting public relations research, mediating conflicts, setting public relations goals, and identifying emerging issues.

When athletic directors were asked to identify the benefits they received from public relations programs, those cited least frequently included a variety of ways by which to generate increased revenue (e.g., ticket and merchandise sales). In response to items related to strong and weak departmental relationships, the weakest perceived relationships were with students, alumni, and boosters.

Stoldt et al. (2001) summarized the results by stating, "If SIDs are indeed their athletic departments' top public relations officers, and yet serve in limited public relations capacities, then it seems likely that college athletic departments are failing to maximize their public relations effectiveness" (p. 170).

The studies by McCleneghan (1995) and Stoldt et al. (2001) raise troubling questions about the role of SIDs in strategic public relations planning. If the majority of their time is spent on administrative duties and they are perceived to fill only technical roles by athletic directors, who are likely to be part of the dominant coalition in the athletic department, their opportunities to provide strategic public relations advice will be limited. If true, this could have important and negative implications for practitioners. Depending on the types of publicity SIDs are asked to engage in, this perhaps may be the reason that Grunig and Hunt (1984) listed sport as an area where press-agentry/publicity is still practiced. Future research should further explore the topic.

In a study focused on strategies used by practitioners working in professional sport, Fortunato (2000) used a case study approach to determine the effectiveness of the National Basketball

Association's (NBA's) media relations strategies and the success the organization had in its efforts to influence media coverage. After conducting in-depth interviews with league executives and public relations staff, Fortunato concluded that "NBA personnel certainly believe they are a very powerful agent in the agenda-setting process and that mass media coverage would be vastly different without the public relations and promotional strategies that are implemented by the NBA" (p. 496).

While also focusing on professional sport, Funk and Pritchard (2006) used an experimental design to explore the effects of positive and negative newspaper coverage on attitudes toward a professional Major League Baseball team. Using a repeated measures prepost design, they found that commitment influences a reader's processing of messages and, as a result, can moderate reader responses. Committed readers had better recall of supportive articles and less committed readers recalled more facts from negative articles.

These results are useful for sport public relations practitioners who may be asked to advise on media relations tactics and develop organizational responses to negative publicity. The study "emphasizes how important media relations are for altering consumer beliefs and feelings about organizations" (Funk & Pritchard, 2006, p. 618). In addition, practitioners should consider different message development strategies depending on the commitment level of the target public and the valence of any recently published news about the organization. The authors' article summary notes that future research would benefit from comparing source characteristics that include both team-sponsored and nonteam-sponsored communication.

The aforementioned articles contribute to a profile of the university sports information profession and begin to explore media relations issues that influence public relations practice in professional sports. Future research should build on topics described here and consider additional research questions that can improve the practical application of results and improve educators' ability to prepare students for careers in sport

public relations. A number of research possibilities are discussed in the next section.

Research Opportunities

Given the growth of professional and university sports during the past few decades, an increase in sport public relations research topics is not surprising. However, a number of important issues and topics that can further improve our understanding of sport public relations remain untested. Indeed, despite the research increase, Neupauer's (2001) plea for helping the unknown field of sport public relations through the development of more scholarly articles on related topics remains relevant. This section explores some of the opportunities.

Similar to public relations practice in other areas, media relations activities make up a large portion of the sport public relations practitioner's work. In one of the few textbooks focused specifically on sport public relations, Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2006) wrote, "The public that perhaps has the greatest potential effect on a sport organization, however, may be the mass media" (p. 64). Their rationale for the statement is supported by describing the extensive attention paid to sport in the media (e.g., all-sport television and radio stations, sport sections of newspapers, and weekly sport magazines). The authors noted the unique partnership that exists between media and sport organizations through their combined efforts to deliver sport content to fans.

Depth interviews that I conducted in 2008 with public relations practitioners working for professional sport organizations and university sports information departments confirm the media relations emphasis in their day-to-day work. Comments from professional sport public relations practitioners working with two different Major League Baseball teams in the Midwest included "The majority of our time is spent on media relations" and "I am continually working on my relationships with the media." University sports information directors working at NCAA Division I and Division II institutions expressed similar sentiments but noted that the sports associated with the media relations work changed frequently during the academic year.

Research opportunities include an in-depth analysis and an improved understanding of the relationships between media members and practitioners and evaluations of the media relations tactics typically used in sport.

Media-Practitioner Relationships

Little is known about media-practitioner relationships in sport public relations. The consumer demand that exists for sport information has the potential to influence the power balance of the relationships. Instead of a situation where the practitioner is actively promoting his or her organization to media members in an effort to increase media coverage, many practitioners in sport are managing requests from the media and making decisions about media access that will be provided to key organizational spokespeople (e.g., players, coaches, owners, and general managers).

The media demand requires organizations to develop credential policies that determine eligibility and provide varied access levels at events (Stoldt et al., 2006). At a professional sport level, a team may issue season credentials to more than 300 media members on an annual basis (B. Britten, personal communication, April 25, 2008).

To accommodate media demands, sport organizations have created press boxes that provide the media with opportunities to work while watching an event (Stoldt et al., 2006). A press box is typically managed by the home team's public relations staff. This creates an environment that encourages the development of interpersonal relationships between practitioners and the media, particularly with those who attend regularly. Additional opportunities for interactions take place when both practitioners and members of the media travel to road sporting events. Not only do relationships develop during the course

of a season; they also continue from year to year, as many members of the media will cover the same team for an extended period of time.

Depending on the size of the media market, the number of media members covering a team on a regular basis will vary. For example, the Chicago White Sox have beat writers from four local newspapers who cover the team from spring training through the end of the season (Beghtol, 2008). The newspapers employing the writers also have 13 sports columnists on staff who will cover the team on an irregular basis. Conversely, the Minnesota Twins, located in Minneapolis, are regularly covered by beat writers from two local newspapers, and each of the papers employs three sports columnists (M. Herman, personal communication, April 22, 2008).

Although media-practitioner relationships in sport remain uninvestigated, power in media-practitioner relationships has been extensively covered in the communication and public relations literature. This provides an appropriate theoretical background and approach for investigating the topic in sport.

The importance of power in human communication is illustrated by its inclusion in the development of theories and as a key variable to test research hypotheses across communication disciplines (Giles & Wiemann, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McGuire, 2001; Millar & Rogers, 1987). Similarly, in public relations research, power has impacted theory development and academic research.

Definitions of power in public relations research vary slightly. Plowman (1998) defined it as something that "involves interactions among different players and the ability to employ some means to achieve an intended effect" (p. 241). The basis of this definition focuses on relationships between people (Dahl, 1957). Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) defined power simply as "the capacity to exert influence, a transaction in which you get others to change their behavior as you intended" (p. 75). However, they note that this definition of power is indicative of a one-way view of public relations. To extend the definition

to include a two-way perspective, Dozier et al. (1995) explained power as follows:

> Excellent communication programs incorporate another dimension of power: the communicator's ability to influence decisions about an organization's goods and services, its policies, and its behavior. The communication department must have power and influence within the dominant coalition to help organizations practice the two-way symmetrical model. (p. 75)

A 2005 special issue of *Journal of Public Relations Research* was dedicated to the continued influence of power on public relations. Within it, Berger (2005) argued that "any public relations theory is deficient to the extent it fails to account for power relations and structures in organizations" (p. 23). This supports the common perspective on power in public relations that focuses on the need for practitioners to become part of an organization's dominant coalition, defined as "that group of people with the power to set directions and affect structure in organizations" (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 15).

Approaching the issue from a postmodern perspective, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) agreed that power is important in public relations, but they argue that practitioners can exercise power outside the dominant coalition using personal characteristics, relationship building, and expertise. Consistent across the different approaches is a focus on power and relationships within an organization. Indeed, Holtzhausen and Voto noted that additional research on power relations between counselors and clients would be valuable to the public relations field.

A logical, yet related, approach would be to investigate power differences between public relations practitioners and a critical external public—the media. A lack of attention to the power differences between these two groups exists despite the dominant role of media relations as a method of communicating messages with targeted publics in modern public relations.

Cho (2006) investigated the impact of types of power and contingent factors that may limit or facilitate power related to health public relations practitioners and their media relationships. Previous research results "suggest that journalists perceive themselves as more powerful and valuable than public relations practitioners" (p. 564).

However, in health reporting, when public relations practitioners play a mediating role between journalists and experts in the industry and the subject matter is often complex, the power in the relationship is expected to be different. Results of a Web survey conducted with PRSA members shows expert power to have the highest mean value, and the respondents both perceived themselves to be experts and were used by reporters covering health news. In addition, expert power was significantly correlated with frequency of media contact and years of experience in health care.

Cho's (2006) research provides a good starting point for studies exploring the relationship between the media and practitioners in sport. While sport's subject matter is not typically complex, practitioners do play a key mediating role between journalists and the "experts" they want to interview. Particularly in professional sport organizations and prominent university sport programs, demand from consumers for sport information creates a situation where media members are relying on practitioners for story ideas, supporting content for story ideas, and, most important, providing access to sources needed to complete stories.

Consumer demand also creates a situation where the media members are asked to repeatedly report on sport organizations. For example, print journalists, television broadcasters, and radio broadcasters not only cover all the games of a particular athletic team; they are also asked to produce content on nongame days and, increasingly, during the team's off-season as well.

Few public relations practitioners working for corporations or representing clients in an agency setting have the luxury of consumer demand for media coverage of their employer or client on a daily basis. The impact that this has in a sport environment on public relations practices and the key media-practitioner relationship should be explored.

Media Relations Tactics

Media relations in public relations practice has been defined as "working with mass media in seeking publicity or responding to their interests in the organization" (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009, p. 10). The value of engaging in media relations is to capitalize on the third-party credibility associated with a message published or broadcast by a member of the independent media (Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008). Its use as a tactic by public relations practitioners has been widespread and prevalent, but in sport public relations, it may be even more popular.

Stoldt et al. (2006) call media relations the most commonly used tactic by sport public relations practitioners. Practical application of the tactic often involves tasks intended to facilitate media coverage of sporting events. These tasks include managing press credentials, organizing and managing a press area (e.g., press box, postgame interview room), designing and writing extensive media guides, writing news releases, and researching and writing game notes. The primary result of this attention to the media is consistent coverage of sporting events and the development of game stories summarizing the outcome.

The impact of game stories on fan behavior, however, is unknown, and it provides an opportunity for research that has practical implications. Scholars should consider measuring the effectiveness of game stories and other tactics at producing behavioral changes among target publics.

It is logical to expect that most of the readers and viewers of media-produced games stories are already fans of one of the participating teams. In many instances, the fans may have even watched or listened to the event prior to exposing themselves to the subsequent media coverage. If true, this means that game stories may have a limited impact on fan behavior. Instead, it is people who

are already fans who consume the coverage and reinforce their already positive attitudes. This would do little to attract new fans or generate additional revenue.

Sport public relations practitioners, like their colleagues in other parts of the field, are challenged by owners at a professional level and athletic directors at a university level to show how their work affects the organization's bottom line (e.g., in generating revenue, protecting against lost revenue). Alternative approaches to media relations should be considered that could potentially attract new fans or increase the financial commitment of casual fans.

Another media relations approach involves the promotion and development of human interest stories. These stories use the human element, often in the form of an individual story, to inform an audience of a topic. The emphasis of the story tends to be either unusual (i.e., unexpected behaviors or events) or based on emotional appeals (Ryan & Tankard, 2005). These stories, which are used less frequently by sport public relations practitioners, only receive a brief mention by Stoldt et al. (2006) in their sport public relations textbook.

Reasons for the limited emphasis on human interest stories by sport public relations practitioners are unknown. They may simply be overwhelmed with a high number of tactical responsibilities, an issue identified in previous research (McCleneghan, 1995; Stoldt et al., 2001), and the result may be a lack of time for story identification and promotion. Other possibilities include a lack of recognition of newsworthy human interest stories within the organization or a low perceived value of the placement of such stories. Regardless of the reasons, the lack of emphasis on human interest story promotion by sport public relations practitioners could be a missed opportunity.

Practitioners may be able to use human interest stories to influence key target publics. Intuitively, it seems possible that human interest stories will generate more word-of-mouth discussion and, in the new media environment, are more likely to be forwarded to other people or posted on a social networking site such as Facebook. When athletic directors, often the immediate supervisors of sports information directors, were asked to rate the strength of their programs' relationships with various stakeholders, the weakest relationship was with students (Stoldt et al., 2001). This could help improve weak relationships and enhance SIDs' credibility with athletic directors.

However, empirical research is needed to substantiate these claims. One approach to rigorously testing these ideas is to develop experimental research designs. This would allow researchers to manipulate message sources and isolate the effects of different story types. It would also improve the generalizability of the findings and generate results that would be immediately useful to practitioners. Experimental research has been advocated by public relations scholars as a way to help determine causality and to evaluate communication message effectiveness (Boynton & Dougall, 2006; Stacks, 2002), and such an approach would also be beneficial in sport public relations research.

An exhaustive list of research possibilities is not within the scope of this chapter. Certainly, a number of relevant topics important to sport public relations deserve further examination by scholars. Future chapters and articles should address the following topics:

- Public relations strategies and tactics that can be used to generate additional revenue and increase fan support (e.g., new media possibilities, evaluating media guide influence on media coverage and the university recruiting process, and an improved understanding of fan motivational factors)

- Sport sponsorship and its impact on consumer behavior

- Product placement in sport and its value as competition for consumer attention increases

- Community relations activities and their impact on consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility

- Crisis public relations issues stemming from the behavior of sponsors (e.g., Enron as a sponsor of the Houston Astros' home ballpark), fans (e.g., college basketball fans rioting after team success or failure), and athletes (e.g., illegal use of performance-enhancing substances)

In some instances, scholars will be able to draw from existing public relations material and related research areas. This can help expose them to a variety of theoretical perspectives that can, when appropriate, be applied to sport public relations. For example, sport sponsorship has been covered extensively in sport marketing journals (e.g., Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007; Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Jensen & Butler, 2007; Kuzma, Veltri, Kuzma, & Miller, 2003).

Research Outlets

Outlets for sport public relations research exist at multiple academic association and professional organization national conferences. In the academic area, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and National Communication Association (NCA) provide two options.

While each association's public relations division is a possible outlet, scholars should consider other divisions and interest groups as well. For example, AEJMC's Entertainment Studies Interest Group includes sport studies as a part of its specialization along with video games and entertainment media.

Smaller specialized conferences focusing exclusively on sport issues to consider include the Scholarly Conference on College Sport and Summit on Communication and Sport.

A variety of options exist through professional associations. PRSA has an entertainment and sport specialization area that meets at its annual international conference. CoSIDA holds an annual summer meeting designed to improve SIDs' job proficiency through technical

panels dealing with communications, publications, and promotions.

Journals that practitioners typically consider as outlets for public relations research—such as *Public Relations Review* and the *Journal of Public Relations Research*—are also appropriate for sport public relations work. A 2008 special issue of *Public Relations Review* was dedicated to sport topics and attempted to "draw attention to the considerable scope that sport has for public relations practice in the field and for applied and critical scholarship" (L'Etang & Hopwood, 2008, p. 87). Other journals that have published sport public relations articles include *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *The Social Science Journal*. Traditional communication and media journals may also be considered when the topic is an appropriate fit.

Conclusion

The ability of sport to capture consumers' attention and money appears to be increasing. This means that there will be additional job opportunities in sport public relations and related areas as the magnitude of public relations successes and failures are enhanced. A likely consequence of having significant financial rewards at stake is a demand for evidence-based decisions by owners and athletic directors.

In this environment, a variety of academic departments at universities—public relations, communication, marketing, management, and kinesiology—are positioning themselves to be the educational providers for students interested in the field. Decisions need to be made by public relations educators about the role they will play in sport public relations education. This chapter is intended to increase awareness in the following areas:

- The different approaches to sport public relations education

- Research topics that will improve our understanding of sport public relations

- Research outlets that exist for sport public relations scholars

Educators, scholars, and practitioners can expand the topics covered here, and doing so will benefit public relations in sport. Many of the proposed research ideas will benefit from practitioner-scholar collaboration, perhaps improving the practical application of research results. In fact, some topics are impossible to effectively research without practitioner support.

In an area where most practitioners do not maintain membership or involvement in traditional public relations professional organizations (e.g., PRSA) or academic associations (e.g., AEJMC), collaborative work could increase the links between this group of practitioners and the rest of the public relations field. More interaction between the groups would strengthen sport public relations education and, based on research results, potentially change some of the normative media relations tactics used in the field.

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