

CULTIVATING THE FAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

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Abstract:

Public relations is about reputation, the result of what we do, what we say, and what others say about us. The practice of public relations is the discipline that seeks to obtain reputation in order to gain support and influence public opinion and behaviour. Public relations in sports refers to communication and image activities aimed at building and maintaining a positive relationship between a sports organization (club, federation, event, etc.) and its public. These activities include information management, strategic communication, image building, and relations with the media and other stakeholders. Sport is no longer just a competition between teams or athletes. In today's hyper-connected and digitalized society, sport has become a major cultural, social, and economic phenomenon, where the fan experience matters almost as much as the result on the field. Fans are no longer just passive consumers of the sporting spectacle, but involved actors, seeking interaction, belonging, and emotion. In this context, public relations (PR) plays an essential role in building and strengthening the bonds between sports entities and their audience. It is no longer enough to attract supporters through performance – a coherent communication and relationship strategy is needed that puts the fan at the centre of attention. In the paper "Cultivating the fan experience through public relations activities" we begin with a brief presentation of the importance of

public relations in sports and on the fan experience, followed by a brief study that addresses the objectives of this paper.

Keywords: fans, sport, public relations, experience, online presence

1. Introduction

Public Relations represents a specific body of knowledge, skills and methods. Heath and Coombs (2006) emphasize that public relations should be understood as an essential component of organizational strategy, providing both theoretical and practical frameworks for modern practice.

Public relations is a phenomenon characteristic of the 20th century, but the roots of this activity extend to the oldest historical periods, appearing to be as old as human communication (Silverman and Smith, 2024).

They represent the management function that deals with the relations between organizations and public segments, at the national and international level, resulting in the specific relations (a specific communication) desired or used by these subjects (organizations or public segments). Public relations activity is carried out by practitioners, who serve numerous types of public and organizations from various fields, including the world of sports (Ledingham, 2003).

Public relations is mainly a means of promoting sports, especially through television or, more recently, through social media channels that offer the possibility of viewing both directly and in replays of competitions destined to the highest level. The internet also offers the possibility of reaching as much information as possible about athletes, types of sports, and the competitions that will take place. There is the possibility of finding useful information about the sports cubes that young people want to orient themselves towards in order to practice a sport. The majority of young people who practice a sport tend to choose a model among high-performance athletes, trying to follow the path of performance that they have walked. Promoting sports through PR brings a very good influence among young people, and in the aspect that it encourages movement, which influences people's health.

They design the communication strategy and policies, create messages and events, choose communication channels, and select spokespersons. In a company's public communication, there can be no question of total transparency, but only of controlled transparency. Public relations represents a filter for the company's communication, a filter that lets through and even amplifies the circulation of favourable messages and, at the same time, prevents or mitigates the impact of unfavourable messages. Public relations achieves a strategic and controlled compromise between the need for communication and the need for transparency, on the one hand, and the need for discretion and confidentiality, on the other.

The role of public relations services and actions is to build the company's identity image in a world based on globalization and differentiation, on an increasingly accentuated income gap, to defend and immunize it at every opportunity, to create and maintain good and indirectly profitable relationships with the most influential public categories.

The public relations practitioner, aiming to serve the public interest, is aware of the influence of public opinion on the decision-making process, his/her advisory and communication activity being carried out as follows (Celebi, 2018):

- a. ensures two-way communication between the organization and the public;

b. tries to present not only the organization's present but also its past and future, translating everything into terms understood by the public; on the other hand, it translates public opinion into terms understood by the members of the organization;

c. studies the organization's relationship needs, as well as the attitude of its public segments towards it, recommends an appropriate policy and action program, and, finally, evaluates their effectiveness;

d. seeks to build and maintain a positive image of the organization, establishing information exchanges between the organization and its public segments in the social, political, economic, and other important forces in society, having public feedback as a guideline;

e. suggests modifying organizational behaviour according to the social, political, and economic responsibilities and needs created by the evolution of human standards and attitudes, according to research (estimations);

f. tries to anticipate and correct wrong impressions and reacts appropriately to criticisms of the organization.

2. Literature review

2.1 Public relations in sports

Public relations in sports refers to a managerial function, based on communication, whose mission is to identify the target audience of the sports organization, to evaluate the relationship between it and its audience, and to improve the relationship between them. The functions of public relations are most often complementary to those of marketing, but differ in the audience to which they are addressed. Public relations is a powerful promotional tool, capable of generating publicity for the sports organization. The most common forms of practicing public relations in sports refer to media relations and community relations. The tactic is to maintain a good relationship with the media to minimize the risk of negative news and positive publicity.

Community relations refer to programs structured so that members of the organization come into direct contact with the external environment and participate in various charitable actions to gain public sympathy.

Other types of relationships that are included here are employee relations, investor relations, customer relations, sponsor relations, and government relations.

Public relations in sports refers to communication and image activities aimed at building and maintaining a positive relationship between a sports organization (club, federation, event, etc.) and its public (Gantz, 2013). These activities include information management, strategic communication, image building, and relations with the media and other stakeholders.

Public relations in sports is a management function essential to the success of any sports organization.

It focuses on:

- Target audience identification:

Determining the groups of people relevant to the sports organization (fans, sponsors, media, etc.).

- Strategic communication:

Developing and implementing messages and communication campaigns that target the target audience and promote the image of the organization.

- Image building:

- Media relations:
- Crisis Management:
- Community Engagement: engagement activities.
- A concrete example of sports PR is effectively communicating the results of a match, managing fan reactions in the event of a defeat, or promoting.

Sports performance is no longer measured only in medals, records, or fans, but also in money. Spectators are no longer simple lovers of sports spectacle, but are consumers who need to be attracted, because their loyalty means... money. As cynical as it may sound, beyond the emotional capital that sports spectacle mobilizes as an act of entertainment, sports are both consumers and producers of money. Financial reasons are actually at the basis of what I call in the book a balance between media and sports. The commercial potential of sports is the reason why it has managed to gain and consolidate a permanent place in the VIP box of the media agenda. The popularity of sports acts and the public visibility offered by the media are translated and evaluated in terms of audiences, advertising budgets, television rights, and implicitly, profitability.

Major competitions, such as the World Cup or the Olympic Games, have long ceased to be just about sports. City brands, cultural and scientific events, diplomatic strategies, new products or limited editions, tourist packages, and new job markets, music hits, and films are built around them – the list is very long. Precisely because it is interested in the success of such events, public relations has managed to transform and promote them as true global spectacles, which end up not only dictating the design of TV schedules, but also generating intense public debates and statements from public actors from the most diverse fields, whether we are talking about politicians, businessmen, actors, singers or journalists.

The relationship between PR and sport has become a special one; the most important role in the globalization of sport has been and is played by the mass media, through its means. In addition, today, through public relations, values, attitudes, and sportsmanship are transmitted, and at the same time, the mass media form, inform, and manipulate, producing changes at the level of society.

The symbiosis of public relations and sport is almost perfect, because without media coverage, sport is not as attractive, just as television, radio, and the print media do not satisfy the audience if they do not bring sports content to their programs, especially since society is increasingly dependent on information. Radio, television, the print media, and the Internet have contributed decisively to increasing the profit of sports competition, respectively, to transforming clubs into important businesses and athletes into millionaires.

2.2 Fan involvement in sports

The importance of fans is immense. Performance sport without them is like a last-minute car without wheels. You look at it, but you can't use it. Everyone knows, fans are extremely important for any team, they create atmosphere, buy tickets, can purchase products with the club's logo, of course if they exist. They should have an essential role in the life of a club, as happens in many countries around the world.

In today's digital age, fan engagement is more important than ever. With so many distractions competing for people's attention online, teams and athletes must find ways to capture the attention of their fans. Without engaged fans, professional sports would not exist as we know them today. Sports public relations is a bit different, however, as they cannot rely solely on statistics and graphs and studies

because they will not lead to attracting fans, ticket sales, and revenue from products sold. In sports, the most important thing is the fan base, so sports teams must create an emotional connection with their audience. Access to sports public relations is important for growing the sports brand.

What exactly does sports public relations entail? It involves the use of various media platforms, such as TV, newspapers, radio, and online, all of which are used to help promote sports teams, athletes, and sports organizations.

Sports public relations is so important for a sports organization, because it includes various activities and practices used to promote and improve the image of sports teams, athletes, and sports organizations by using various channels that the media makes available. All of these channels involve the creation of appropriate content that helps fans interact with the media and athletes and influence public opinion (Santos et al., 2019). That is why sports public relations aims to create and maintain a positive image among athletes and teams to increase the number of fans.

Fans are deeply involved, making them more receptive to brand messages (Popa et al., 2024). Studies show that sports content generates twice as much engagement on social media as other types of brand-related content.

Aligning with popular teams or athletes builds trust and long-term loyalty from consumers. Sports fans are more likely to buy from businesses that show their support for their favourite teams. Public relations professionals use the excitement of sports to build brand awareness, increase sales, and connect with fans. Fans are, first and foremost, family members of each player on a team. Parents, siblings, grandparents, or any other loved ones are there unconditionally, for each player, but also for the team as a whole.

Even if they are invisible, their energy is felt every time. The crowd echoes with every goal or basket scored or every miss by their favourite team. Now, with technology, a team collects thousands of comments, likes, or reactions from fans. Some even go beyond this status and, in addition to encouragement and appreciation, can make constructive criticism or give advice. There have been many cases in which people have come together and created unique moments for the teams they supported. We emphasize from the beginning that fans are not ordinary people. Fans do not go unnoticed and cannot be confused. They make their inclination towards a particular team felt through the clothes they wear, the anthems they learn, their consumption habits, and their active involvement during a match (Costin et al., 2024).

Fans are, most of the time, people who channel all their attention and energy in a specific direction. Fans don't get up from in front of the TV no matter what happens. Fans defend their preferences at all costs. And if a fan is really there, anything can happen.

Fans play a vital role in sports, providing support, motivation, and influencing the atmosphere of sporting events (Dietz-Uhler & Lanter, 2008). Their presence and enthusiasm can boost athletes' performance, create an electrifying atmosphere, and help build a strong community around a team or sport.

2.3 The sports fan experience and public relations

Public relations involves establishing good relationships with various organizations, obtaining favourable publicity from them, creating an appropriate "corporate image", and preventing or denying unfavourable rumours and news. The public relations department has several specific tools at its disposal, including: press relations – disseminating important information through the media, to draw attention

to a person, a product, or a service; product advertising – promoting certain products; company communications – carrying out internal and external communications, lobbying, and consulting.

The evolution of sports broadcasting in Romania has created exciting opportunities for fan engagement in the digital age. From the early days of sports on television and radio to social media campaigns and virtual reality, fans now have more ways than ever to connect with their favourite teams and athletes. While some forms of engagement may be controversial, such as betting on sports, there are many other options available. Fans, sports organizations, and media outlets need to address these new forms of fan engagement. By doing so, they can create a more immersive experience for viewers and build stronger connections between fans and teams. In addition, these new technologies can provide valuable insights into fan behaviour, which can influence marketing strategies and improve overall engagement (Sandu et al., 2025).

Social media has revolutionized the way fans engage with sports. We are no longer limited to passive observation while sitting on the couch or in the stands. We now have access to behind-the-scenes content, real-time updates, and direct interaction with players and teams. Social media has given us a sense of ownership over our favourite sports and allowed us to actively participate in creating the narrative. Public relations in the field of sports has gained increasing importance in recent years, with the growth of the sports industry, which has many facets that must include strategies and policies, all with the aim of being able to imagine the brand created by people or organizations associated with the sports world. Thus, we can say that sports relations involve the entire communication process through which messages must be sent to help build a positive relationship with the media and improve interaction with fans in order to increase the number of loyal fans and supporters (Barbu and Barbu, 2020). It is just like in other fields, a strong, solid, and growing brand image is vital in the world of sports.

To this end, it constantly creates follow-up, advertisements, publicity, and presence on social networks, capitalizing on positive media coverage to be able to imagine the sports brand.

The goal of public relations is to build a positive and credible image of the sports organization among these niches, so that they become loyal partners and support its activity. Public relations can also help increase the company's visibility and improve its reputation among fans.

Public relations has a huge influence on sports. It affects fan engagement because the principle is to connect with real people, not brands.

So, sports public relations people focus primarily on fan engagement to turn athletes, staff, and superfans into influencers.

For sports organizations and athletes, public relations is crucial to gain brand support and sponsorships. To this end, it is important to create beneficial links between companies and sports organizations, so sports public relations specialists appear as mediators.

In addition to providing financial support, these sponsorships extend and provide recognition of the sports activity or teams involved.

Companies and athletes, along with their fans, maintain their image and can manage potential crises due to sports public relations, a vital part of the sector. The sports sector can increase fan involvement, attract sponsors, and maintain a positive reputation by implementing methods used in public relations (Pradhan et al., 2019).

There is no doubting the role that public relations has on the fan experience in the world of sports, becoming a crucial component of the sector's success.

3. Research methodology

This survey took place between May 3, 2025, and June 18, 2025, through the Google Forms platform and was addressed only to sports fans. This study was conducted by completing a questionnaire with the 88 participants in this small study. The questionnaire was conducted in order to achieve the objectives of this research. It contains 24 items. The data obtained were subjected to univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses, using Microsoft Office Excel. Thus, the first questions aimed to create the respondent's profile, and the following ones analysed the objectives established within this research.

Analysing the data regarding the respondents, we observe that 28 % are female, and 72 % are male. The number of respondents aged between 20 - 30 represented 44 %, 6 respondents were aged 30 - 40, respectively 21 %, 11 respondents, equivalent to 29 % were aged between 40 - 50, and the remaining respondents, equivalent to 6 % were over 50.

The ranking of respondents according to their last completed studies highlighted the fact that 9 respondents have higher education, the vast majority have completed high school (44 %), 22 % have completed middle school, and 2 respondents (6 %) have post-university studies.

Regarding the environment in which they live, the vast majority of people live in urban areas, namely 72 %, and the rest live in rural areas.

4. Findings and discussions

The first question in our study asked participants what they thought public relations meant in sports (figure 1).

Thus, many of them considered public relations to be about marketing and advertising, or managing and strengthening the image and reputation of the sports brand. They also considered it to be about the process of communicating with sports fans or the presence of the sports organization on various social media channels.

From the analysis of the answers given, it can be seen that the majority of respondents encourage the existence of a marketing and public relations department within each federation, team, or sports club. The existence of such a department or the existence of specialized people can help achieve the goals of the team or the athletes. Applying a PR strategy also brings a plus to sports performance, which helps to achieve the proposed goals.

We also wanted to know which sport the respondents considered to enjoy the greatest interest from the media and public relations. The sport that enjoys the greatest interest from the media is tennis, according to the participants, probably due to the competitions won in this sector recently. Then came football and handball, which are considered to be quite well promoted in various media channels.

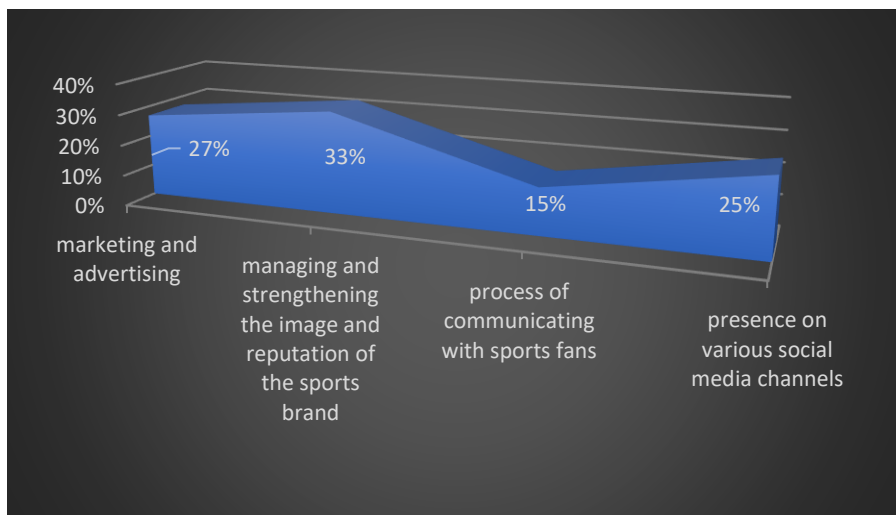


Figure 1. Distribution according to the definition off public relations in sport

Although it is a sport with a great track record, gymnastics occupies the last place in our ranking. Therefore, tennis and handball appear with a positive image, and football and gymnastics with a negative image, and the sport that enjoys the greatest interest from the press is tennis (figure 2).

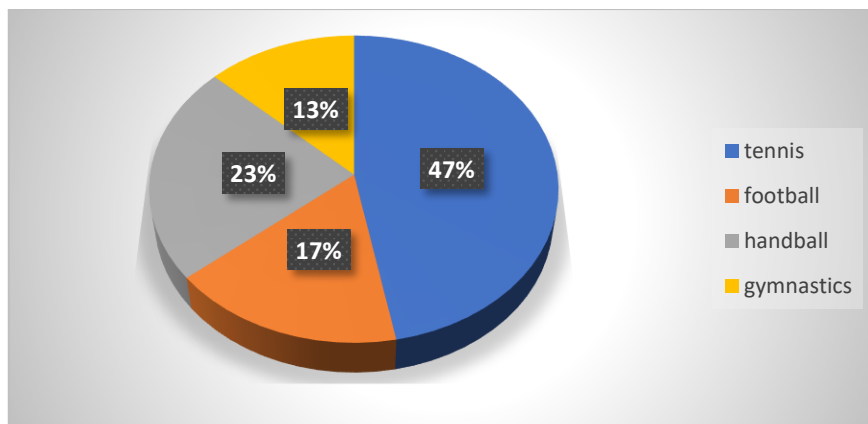


Figure 2. Distribution according to which sport enjoy the greatest interest from the PR

Then, in this small study, we wanted to know the opinion of fans regarding the communication between the sports club and the fans in creating a positive experience. As can be seen in figure 3 below, the vast majority agree that a well-developed communication process is necessary in order to maintain fan loyalty in the first place, but also to increase the fan base, the club's notoriety, and to create a positive image of the club.

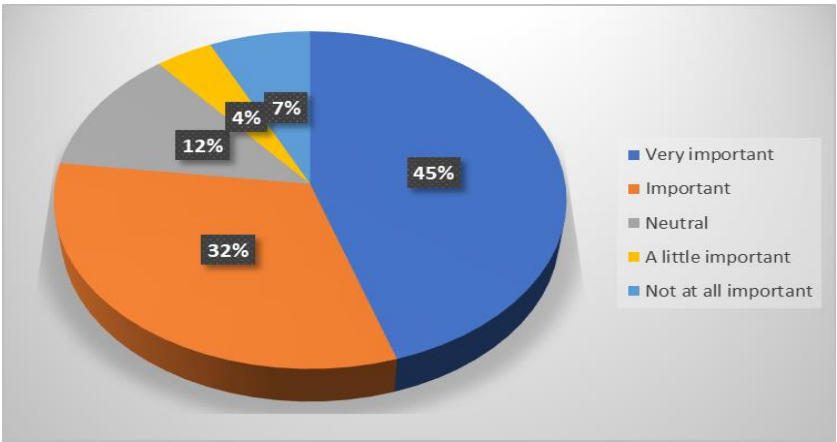


Figure 3. Distribution according to the importance of communication between the club and fans

Next, we wanted to see what type of content the sports club captures the most attention from fans. Thus, he is most interested in behind-the-scenes clips and information about matches and results, but that does not mean that he does not also attach importance to interviews with players/coaches, campaigns and social activities, or various contests and activations for fans (figure 4).

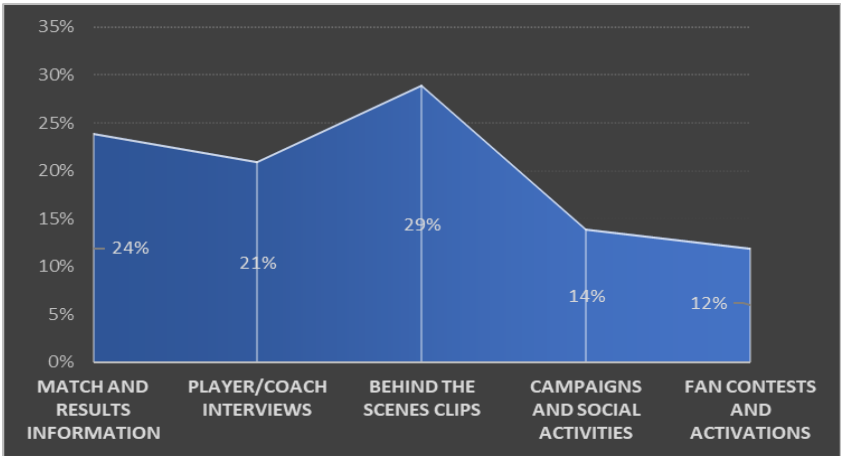


Figure 4. Distribution based on the content distributed by the club

The next question wanted to know how many of the participants in this study participated in any event organized by the sports club outside of competitions, such as meetings with players, launches, and fan zones. The vast majority answered affirmatively, but many have never participated, which raises a question mark regarding the public relations department of sports clubs that should put more effort into organizing such events that have only favourable consequences (figure 5).

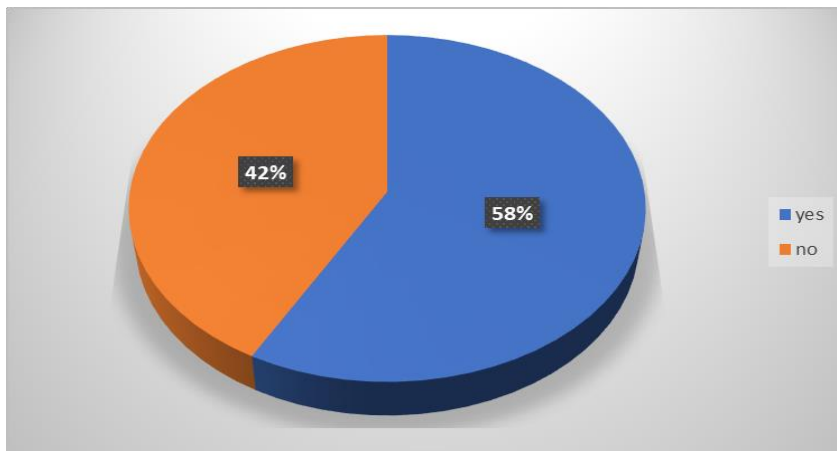


Figure 5. Distribution according to participation in various events organized by clubs

Next, we wanted to understand how important the social media channels used by sports organizations are. As can be seen below, considering that we already live in a world where most people can no longer imagine the absence of social media networks, almost half of the respondents believe that these channels are quite effective, and a third that they are extremely effective for a sports club to achieve its main goal, namely increasing the number of fans, which will implicitly have favourable consequences in various branches (Figure 6).

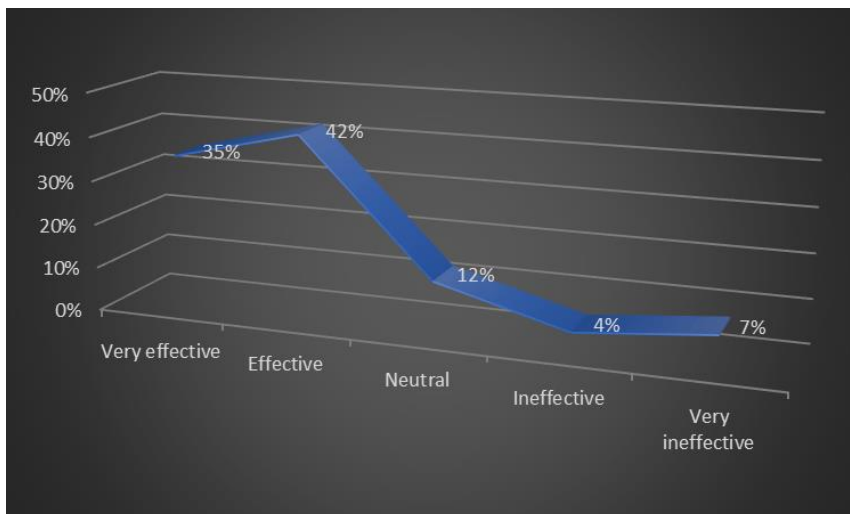


Figure 6. Distribution according to the importance of social media channels used by clubs

The last question in the study wanted to know the respondents' opinion regarding the impact of a well-designed public relations campaign.

A very well-executed campaign will have a positive impact, which will lead to improved fan relations, increased fan base, and strengthened relationships between them and athletes. While a campaign can also lead to negative effects, especially if it is forced and does not show credibility among fans. This is precisely why public relations in sports is important, because it can lead to an increase in the number of fans and, implicitly, income with them, or, on the contrary, to a reduction in these elements (figure 7).

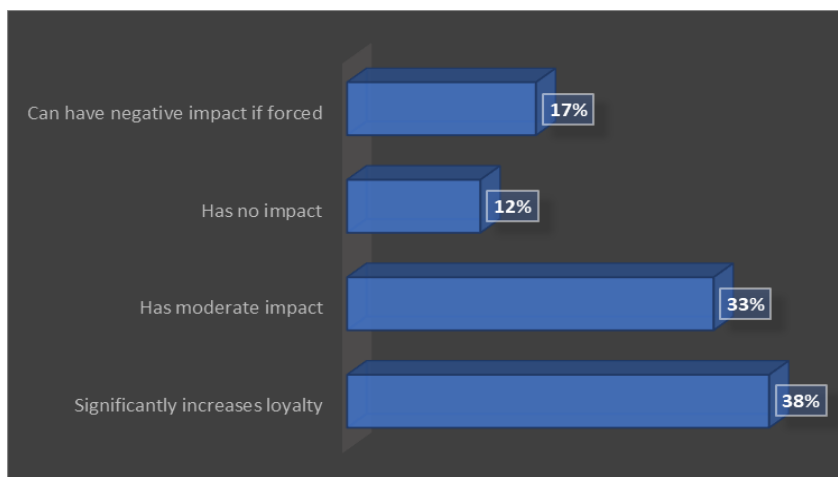


Figure 7. Distribution based on the impact of a well-done public relations campaign

5. Conclusions

Public relations in sports mainly contributes to the stability and maintenance of relationships between sports organizations and their fan base. Therefore, it is important to use the advertising channels available in our times to facilitate understanding, acceptance, and communication between sports fans and sports organizations, athletes, and sports teams.

Public relations is no longer limited to promotion or crisis management. In the sports context, they are a strategic component of brand management. In this context, public relations (PR) takes on an essential role in building and strengthening the bonds between sports entities and their audience. It is no longer enough to attract fans through performance – a coherent communication and relationship strategy is needed, which puts the fan at the centre of attention.

Public relations is no longer an ancillary function in sports, but a central pillar of brand and loyalty strategy. In an era where emotion sells more than performance, a club's ability to build, communicate, and sustain an authentic relationship with its fans is becoming a major competitive advantage. From the analysis of the answers given, it can be seen that the majority of respondents encourage the existence of a marketing and public relations department within each federation, team or sports club. And the existence of such a department or the existence of specialized people can help achieve the objectives of the team or athletes. Applying a PR strategy also brings a plus to sports performance, which helps achieve the proposed objectives.

Regarding the impact that sport has on our sample, it is seen that the respondents are consumers of sports, in various forms. There is an audience, there is potential, it only remains to have specialized people to create, maintain and facilitate the connection between them. Cultivating the fan experience through PR involves more than marketing: it means empathy, consistency and real engagement. And teams that succeed in turning fans into partners on the road will benefit not only from constant support, but also from a lasting and valuable brand identity.

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