



Make the media your ally

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of key considerations for working with the media. While enormous potential exists to reach and build relationships with players and other stakeholders, coaches should be mindful of the risks associated with inaccurate and disparaging communications.

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INTRODUCTION

The media is part of everyday life. While it can mean different things to individuals, the media has been recently defined as "a range of communication modalities including traditional ones like print, television and radio, but also internet-based communications such as online magazines, podcasts and blog" (Matthews, 2015). Unquestionably the media landscape has changed dramatically in recent times, so much so that we are said to be living in an "era of instantaneous information transmission" (Shoemaker & Ashburn, 2000). Never has this been more evident than in the explosion of digital and social media leading to new ways of communicating with, and engaging an audience. We need look no further than the billions of people around the world who have Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts!

Any user of electronic devices can create and post content, bypassing the "old media" gatekeepers such as journalists, editors or producers. This revolutionising of content production provides amazing opportunities, but there can be pitfalls.

It is understandable that some coaches have been hesitant to engage and work with the media; others will have embraced the media as spokespeople, presenters, writers and consumers (e.g., receiving news via online or social media). Looking forward, coaches will need to work with the media as it becomes more and more our 'modus operandi'. We all need to be communicators, and effective communicators at that! In this article, we highlight some key considerations to facilitate effective engagement with the media and offer some practical strategies to ensure that a coach's communication is clear, accurate and ethical.

Examples of media activities

Many media opportunities exist for coaches including:

- Providing content for a tennis magazine, local paper, radio or newsletter
- Writing an editorial or a letter to a publisher/editor
- Providing opinion about tennis and/or delivering messages across a variety of mediums
- Influencing policy and direction of tennis by rousing public opinion with information and messages through social media that are then picked up by traditional media outlets
- Preparing releases/flyers/brochures/website etc. about tennis programmes, camps and other tennis activities
- Using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and blogs etc. to connect with players, parents and other stakeholders
- Commentating on matches for radio, television, podcasts etc.
- Developing video clips for training purposes

Potential benefits

The explosion in media options, and particularly the increasing use of social media, has far-reaching potential benefits for coaches including:

- Direct dissemination of information broadly and quickly

- The ability to control the message, particularly via digital media
- Raise awareness of/promote coaching business and activities
- Build and strengthen professional and business relationships
- Facilitate active interactions with players, other coaches, etc.
- Engage players and teams in actively producing content
- Establish and build coaching/personal profile
- Promote and grow the sport

Choice of media option(s)

Coaches need to consider many factors when deciding which media options to engage with. Relevant factors include:

- How best to reach the target audience – which medium works best and what style within that medium?
- Your personal style, prior experience and level of confidence – for example, are you more comfortable in writing material than presenting before a television crew
- The opportunities to present verbal or written materials
- Most effective use of social media, for instance whether to produce a written or audio-visual blog, and the style, for example, first person or observational
- The cost and time involved in preparing, presenting and distributing material
- Identifying a journalist/publication that is most likely to be interested and positive about your message

Have a story to tell

Before engaging with the media coaches should ensure they have a story to tell. This means:

- Know what you want to say and achieve
- Carefully choose words (verbal and/or written) to best appeal to your target demographic. When communicating with laypeople, avoid jargon/technical terms but use them for specific target groups
- Avoid using disparaging or negative language
- Ensure your story contains, and is limited to, 1-3 key messages
- Consider including photos, diagrams, videos, effects, fun facts or even humour to enhance interest



- Be clear about your audience and tailor communication accordingly (e.g., use digital/social media to engage with youngsters and more traditional communication such as emails or newsletters to parents)

Preparation

Effectively telling a story entails thorough preparation so it is vital for coaches to:

- Ensure you have sufficient detail about the audience, topic to be addressed, length/time of presentation, any deadlines etc
- Take time to update your knowledge and research a topic/issue – what is the latest information to inform your communication?
- If using traditional media, such as local newspaper or radio station, invest time in developing a relationship of trust with the relevant personnel - journalists/producers/hosts - to give your message the best chance of being delivered accurately and positively
- Prepare a draft of written material, to be checked by someone else or yourself some time later, before releasing
- Practise presentations such as talks, lectures or interviews prior to the event – this can be done in front of colleagues/friends or in front of a mirror if more convenient
- Practise bringing an interview back to your message
- Think before you hit the send button - digital communications are instant and largely irretrievable
- Ensure you are conversant with all aspects of your subject and potential follow up questions/relevant issues

Ethical considerations

Coaches should be mindful of their duty of care and professional responsibilities. This means:

- Stick with what you know; keep to the facts and ensure your information is accurate and timely
- Understand your professional boundaries and communicate only on matters/topics/issues where you have the relevant expertise and experience. Refer to others if outside your area of expertise
- Before disclosing information about your players get their permission to do. Likewise, before disclosing sensitive information or presenting the work of others, get relevant consents
- Provide comment about others in an objective, respectful and accurate way. It is best to avoid hearsay and keep comment to your own direct experiences
- Ensure your opinions (the currency of social media!) are informed, well expressed and respectful
- Evaluate the potential impact or consequences of your communication BEFORE actioning it
- Show passion about a matter/topic/issue but avoid emotive comments that could be construed as offensive, bigoted, 'outof-touch' or defamatory

Risks

The ability for coaches to disseminate information quickly and widely to many people carries potential risks including:

- Substantial damage resulting from inaccurate or ill-advised communications
- Threats to confidentiality and safeguarding player/client confidences

On-going development

Given the rapidly changing media environment coaches can be vigilant and attend to their on-going professional development. To this end you may wish to:

- Attend coaching conferences
- Access relevant materials on the ITF coach website, <http://en.coaching.itftennis.com/home.aspx>
- Keep coaching qualifications current by fulfilling professional development requirements
- Undertake media training with special attention to the use of digital and social media
- Access the multitude of media/communications material on the web for guidance
- Keep up with new media trends to further your business, relationships and profile

- Discuss with colleagues to identify best practice
- Evaluate what peers are doing in media to help guide your own media strategy

CONCLUSIONS

It is understandable that some coaches may be reluctant to work with the media, but the growth of digital media has undoubtedly given coaches greater control over direct communications. Still, all comments need to be carefully considered. The safeguard might be imagining your opinion, quote or message on the front page of the newspaper or being announced to a room full of your colleagues/ peers. Only go ahead if you are comfortable with this scenario.



Clear communication and setting boundaries with journalists regarding what is 'off the record' and what exactly you will be quoted about can save much angst and damage.

In the first author's case, comments she made to a journalist several years ago were taken out of context reflecting poorly on one of her players. While a formal apology was given by the journalist, it was an experience that left a mark and trepidation to again discuss tennis matters with any journalist. Other coaches may have had similar experiences however the fact remains that we, as coaches, can gain much if we embrace the media to help promote our professional profile, businesses, players and the sport. Further, today's offerings of media options provide tremendous potential for us to engage with, and build relationships, with players and other key stakeholders (Wang & Zhou, 2015). With the touch of a computer key coaches can disseminate information 'in real time' and reach literally millions of people. But this ability to rapidly and widely disseminate information has a downside. There is potential for damage resulting from inaccurate or disparaging communication; especially in light of our inability to retract in many instances once the communication is released.

For information to be shared effectively, coaches should be mindful of a number of important factors including adherence to professional boundaries and respect for player confidentiality. It is critical that coaches exercise careful judgement and sound common sense in what they say/write, and how, and where they say/write it. Always pause to think twice about the potential impact of what you have to say or write (Shoemaker & Ashburn, 2000).

It is hoped that this paper provides guidance to facilitate clear, accurate and ethical communications. Much can be achieved when coaches embrace the media after completing due diligence to understand, not only its potential, but also its risks. Nothing is more important to a coach than player-coach relationship(s) and his/her reputation. With considered use of the various media available, relationships and reputations need not be jeopardised. Indeed, with awareness and preparation, they can be powerfully enhanced by using the media effectively. Making the media an ally seems a beneficial, sensible and wise approach to take.

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