

Sports Geek Nation AMA with Jeff Chatterton

Jeff Chatterton help sports teams and major venues end bad publicity through his company Checkmate Public Affairs, based in Canada. At last count, he handles crisis PR for the venues hosting 9 NBA, NHL, NFL and Major League Baseball teams.

Connect with Jeff Chatterton on Twitter [@jchatterton](#), [LinkedIn](#) and Slack [@Jeff Chatterton](#)
Find out more about Checkmate Public Affairs at <http://www.checkmatepublicaffairs.com/>

Here's the full transcript:

Links to names will link you into Slack community, if you are not a member [please sign up here](#).

Q. [Sean Callanan](#): I'll start things off @Jeff Chatterton can you give everyone some background on your sports business journey and what topics/questions fit in with your experience?

A. [Jeff Chatterton](#): Long story short - if you see me in your office, someone is having a bad day. I make it better. 😊

I've been doing crisis communications in general for the past 18 years with my own company, Checkmate Public Affairs. I made a decision early on to specialize in Crisis work - no news release writing, no social media posts, no SEO... JUST crisis communications. And along the way, I've had the opportunity to work with a number of major sports venues.

Today, I count about 30 major sports and venue sites as clients, across North America, Europe and Australia (just one in Asia.) I do a lot of one day training sessions, but also get called on to fix everything from food safety issues, negative headlines, upset regulators and the like.

Good topics can include "What's the easiest way as a sports entity to get in hot water?"

"I hear a crisis communications plan is essential, but other folks are saying it's a waste of money - who's right?"

And of course if you're actually dealing with something going on out there (and come on - let's just be honest with ourselves for a minute? I KNOW some of you are.) and you're comfortable talking about it, we can actually talk this one out and give you a roadmap to get out of trouble.

Q. [sophiemoore](#): @Jeff Chatterton without naming names...

What is the most intense situation you have flown in on your cape to salvage? What made it so difficult and what did you learn?

A. Jeff Chatterton: Hey Sophie... There's been a few.

Most intense in 'general?' That's easily when someone has died and at first blush, it's the client's fault.

In a venue, that can be for just about any reason.... But I've realized that the facts aren't important. Remember - people die in venues all the time. It's not whether or not there's a dead body, it's whether or not people are UPSET about the fact there's a dead body.

I had a dual fatality for a hot air balloon company 8 years ago that just about bankrupted the company.

What I learned from working with that company - and have since applied to numerous sports examples... is two things.

A - There is no substitute for speed. Speed is the be all and end all... you can't afford to make perfect the enemy of "good". If your organization has a 7 step process of approval before a spokesperson is allowed to speak, you're going to kill yourself.

B - It's not about facts, it's always about emotions. And that means in order to communicate and win, you NEED to communicate with empathy.

Your audience needs to KNOW you know how they feel. You don't need to necessarily agree with them - but if you can't communicate an emotional awareness, they will 'find ways to communicate that awareness for you.' That's where you end up with lawsuits, activists, protesters and really really pissed off regulators.

That's a bad thing.

And to wrap up that mini-story? The initial dual fatality nearly bankrupted to balloon company. They lost 90% of their bookings in 36 hours. We got to work... fast. Communicated with empathy. LOTS of empathy. Long story short: two years later, business for that company was UP by 29%.

That's right - they actually GREW their business based on how they responded.

It's not the facts of the crisis - it's how you respond to the crisis that determines trust and credibility.

Q. [liambednarski](#): @Jeff Chatterton How do you keep your clients calm? Both the business as a whole and certain individuals within them? I'm sure even though clients hire you, individuals want to do their own thing or have their own reactions at time. How do you curb that kind of behaviour to get everyone on the same page so to speak?

A. Jeff Chatterton: @liambednarski ... dude... I wish there was a magic formula for that.

A couple of observations: You never see firefighters run into a building. You don't see paramedics run into an apartment. They walk.

They walk for two reasons... no one needs injured paramedics. And it's important to keep everyone calm.

Most of the time, I'm not dealing with "Oh my God, the building is on fire" type situations. Those are easy to fix. Get out. Problem solved. I get called the day after with "So, it turns out our fire extinguishers were expired by four days... it wouldn't have made any difference, but I'm afraid the media is going to hear about it."

That's not a panic situation - that's a 'swallow hard... take a minute to think... and do what's best in the name of truth, honesty and credibility.' No running involved... but I am going to 'walk' very purposefully and with intent towards a specific direction.

(OK - that may be a crappy metaphor. Work with me.)

The second observation is that I have the right to fire clients. I've never fired anyone for panicking but I will fire them if they're not completely honest right from the start with me.

When I get called into a situation, I do have some very explicit rules and expectations, and I make sure the client and the staff all agree with them. Once everyone is on the same page, we can get work done.

If you can't get everyone on the same page, the job becomes impossible.

Q. [Rick](#): Im thinking @Jeff Chatterton that in this day and age with so many pro players being ardent social media users and the rise of smartphones/cameras being everywhere, that business must be booming? You hear almost daily of sports stars, getting in trouble and the evidence of their atrocities being quickly filmed by the public.

In Australia, especially in the football codes here: Rugby/League/AFL, there use to be unwritten rules and nods to bad behaviour being hushed up and swept under the carpet. Not anymore - as anything untoward is captured by a random video and it cannot be hidden away.

It's amazing that sports bodies or teams, don't have proper plans in place to deal with these crisis problems - especially how something so simple, can have devastating effects on a team team especially their reputation & their sponsors.

A. Jeff Chatterton: It's true - today, EVERYONE is a reporter. If you're in Australia, you may not be familiar with the crisis United Airlines got themselves into 8 months ago, but they dragged a client off a plane. 5-10 years ago that's a footnote but Youtube video showed a bloody, beaten passenger getting dragged off a plane. That's brutal for a reputation.

Think about that the next time you're sitting on the toilet. You think you're in private. You can stare at your ugly toenails. There is no such thing as privacy anymore for public entities like professional sports companies. Ugly toenails get broadcast to the world.

You raised an interesting point - you mentioned crisis communications plan. I'm actually (shockingly) NOT a fan. I think they're brutally overpriced and useless. I can talk about that at length if anyone wants. But I am a HUGE fan of 'having a neutral, calm, third party who can offer perspective and tell you what to do next, 24/7/365.'

That calming voice is what allows teams to keep their sponsor revenue, avoid media headlines, and keep angry season ticket holders from picketing outside the gate.

Q. seancallanan: being called in *after* is the sexier story in your line of work. What steps do you implement in the *before* stages to reduce the damage of a potential issue? (and how many only implement after they have been burned)

A. Jeff Chatterton: I'd argue that 99% of the things that I get called in on are things that a client knew were about to go wrong, or SHOULD have known were about to go wrong. Where someone like me can make a world of difference... and I mean a gigantic bucket crap-ton of difference... is when I get the phone call earlier rather than later.

Frankly - and I don't want this to look like it's self promotional - but that's why I started CrisisTether. It's like Crisis Communications insurance. Flat rate monthly gets you access 24/7 to me or a colleague of mine. If there's a problem, we're on your doorstep within hours, anywhere in the world, and we're there for weeks until the problem is resolved. Great service, right?

But that's not the REAL benefit. Rather than us make money when you have a problem, we're reversing the risk. We have to do more work when you have a problem, so rather than counting hours and screwing over clients with padded invoices when they can't fight back... we have a vested interest in actually preventing a crisis from breaking in the first place.

That's why I ENCOURAGE my CrisisTether clients to just pick up the phone and talk to me. Test results on your indoor air quality? Had to fire a line cook for stealing cash from the till?

Occupational Health and Safety making recommendations? I WANT to know about it. I can jump in early and make tiny little tweaks to the little problems LONG before they blow up and become the big problems.

That's something that no other crisis firm out there is doing, and honestly, I think that's just sad. This way you KNOW we have your best interests at heart, rather than milking a client for needless billable hours (cough - most law firms - cough.)

Now - all that being said... yeah, the after stories are WAY sexier... dead bodies in Africa, bandito's invading a venue in Peru, news conferences in Brisbane... fun times. But those are stories best told over beer. They're not actually HELPFUL stories.

Long story short - the single best investment anyone can make if they're serious about protecting the reputation is to have a skilled, dispassionate and neutral third party who is unafraid to step in and show leadership. A lot of these situations are brutally, brutally difficult to disarm on your own especially if it's YOUR conduct that's the problem.

If your CEO or star athlete is accused of sexual harassment (and in the #MeToo era, that's more common than ever) they're not the ones who should be making decisions. It's too emotionally impactful.

Unfortunately, you're right - they often don't learn that lesson until it's too late.

liambednarski: @Jeff Chatterton I work in a reactive environment with the goal of working / creating a proactive environment.

How do you provide proactive services without being invasive to the client?

They can take offense that you are trying to tell them what to do when you spot a problem especially before they even realize it's a problem.

I'm curious as to how you alert them to a situation.

How do you break unfortunate, cold or harsh realities to a client?

Jeff Chatterton: That's actually relatively easy.

"Hey, Ms Client - let me tell you a story about a situation I faced....
... Here was the situation...
... here was the thing that they did that actually made it worse...
... here's what they did that could have made it better..."

The I wrap it up with some version of “does any of this resonate with you? I’m just thinking out loud here... wouldn’t it be awesome if we had *this awesome end result* without having to go through *this painful process that created the lesson in the first place?*

If leading the horse to water doesn’t make them drink, I resort to the bigger bullet.

“Ms Client, you brought me out here because you wanted a neutral, third party set of eyes to help protect you, right? OK. Do I have your permission to speak frankly?”

(No one has EVER said “No” to that request. And now that they’ve given you permission, the gloves come off.)

The key is to point out facts without assigning blame. Instead of saying “You let your employees park in wheelchair parking spots on non-event days” I try to say things like “I’m here on a non-event day and I noticed lots of people parking in designated access parking spots. I feel this is an issue that could easily be perceived poorly - do you agree?”

Q. [jase](#): Hey @Jeff Chatterton Love your considered approach. I sense you are great at sales.

A. Jeff Chatterton: @jase if I was good at sales, I wouldn’t be doing crisis PR. I’m almost positive you can make more money by being good at sales.

Q. [Dan Cholerton](#): Hey @Jeff Chatterton, I previously worked with an ex-Premier League footballer who was very outspoken, opinionated and would often drop what we referred to as ‘grenades’. He’d become embroiled in Twitter debate - often stepping over the legal barrier - to which we’d be scrabbling blogs, social posts together (all a while his lawyer was doing the same) to ensure he didn’t face legal action. Now, given the nature of his character, the softer ‘grenades’ largely worked in his favour and allowed us to evolve the debate further and therefore produce more content.

Have you any scenarios whereby you’ve managed to positively spin a crisis and/or a client has actually come out the other end in an improved light?

A. Jeff Chatterton: Dan Cholerton... Turning a crappy situation into a victory is what I do!

We live in an era of slacktivism and manufactured outrage. It’s easy to get caught up in something and get sideways... But in the meantime, the important audiences get ignored because you’re focused on keyboard warriors in their mother’s basement.

But absolutely... When you know what the important audience is, and can focus on their needs... That's a powerful tool.

I had a children's author admit an alcohol and cocaine addiction... We turned it into a brave statement regarding openness and mental health issues.

I mentioned my hot air balloon clients already.

I had a major venue that discovered their catering team was stealing money... We turned it into a celebration of accountability.

A venue concerned about media coverage for ticketing practices used it as a catalyst to cement some relationships and book 3 major acts.

Long story short... It's easy to get caught up in the noise instead of what's truly important.

What is Sports Geek Nation?

Been forwarded this from a colleague? That's great we love seeing our members get credit for sharing their knowledge. Sports Geek Nation is a curated sports business community in Slack and Facebook which will help you learn from the very best in the world. Sports Geek Nation was founded by Sean Callanan in 2015 (as #SportsBiz Slack), it connects sports executives who work in digital, data and technology.

Sports Geek Nation has members from (in alphabetical order) Australia, Canada, Denmark, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States working in sports such as basketball, football, ice hockey, baseball, AFL, horse racing, golf, rugby league, netball and more.

You can join Sports Geek Nation by going to SportsGeekNation.com