

PR lessons

May 2017

Stand up for yourself

A report on communication lessons from the demise of the Wellington Sevens



Introduction

The removal of the Sevens Rugby event from being held in Wellington comes after 20 years of phenomenal success. A total of 23,837 tourists came to Wellington for the Sevens in 2013 (63 per cent of all attendees). Wellington City Council says that one event injected over \$18 million to the city.

But within three years of that high point, the crowds had all but disappeared.

What changed in the few years before and around that time was the appearance of criticism in public discourse about crowd behaviour at the event.

We analysed the demise of the Sevens because many organisations face similar campaigns and pressure from special interests. Many organisations respond similarly in trying to accommodate the criticism.

We wanted to understand how social developments affected the event, and how the response of organisers helped or hindered the event's success.

Summary

The Wellington Sevens was ended because a rapid fall in crowd attendance made it financially unviable.

The decline was caused primarily by the Sevens organisers themselves. They criticised crowd behaviour and changed

rules that deterred the basis of the enjoyment; a party of silly costumes and silly behaviour, fuelled by alcohol consumption.

The organisers acquiesced to, and collaborated with, the “moral panic” (an imbalanced, hyper-sensitive reaction to non-extraordinary normal events) among the City establishment, including the Council and Police.

It was driven by non-attendees who disliked the behaviour, and campaigning media, but gathered strength when it was allied with anti-alcohol and social disorder sentiments. This gave moral imperative and opportunity which meant establishment and elite figures felt obliged to agree that “something must be done” to change the behaviour.

The changes made by the Sevens organisers and the City establishment directly affected the “party” atmosphere. This experience also relied on large crowds – the joint and mutually reinforcing experience. When attendance began to decline in response to the changes, it quickly gathered pace. Each fall affected the experience, which deterred future attendance.

The lesson is that acquiescence to value-signalling of noisy people on contentious subjects can disadvantage those most important to your organisation or event; customers, staff or shareholders.

It is instructive that the Police finally praised crowd behaviour and declared themselves satisfied over the 2017 event, when effectively no one turned up and was a fiscal disaster.

The Police and the City establishment had killed a “golden goose” event enjoyed by tens of thousands of everyday New Zealanders, and the Sevens organisers collaborated.

It’s over

The crowd that turned up for each day of the Sevens Rugby weekend in 2017 was a third of the capacity of Wellington Stadium. The low turnout showed that the very weak sales of the 2016 tournament were not a glitch. The party was over.

It was already a slightly marginal event financially. Wellington Rugby, which owns the rights to all rugby at the Stadium, had to be bailed out by NZ Rugby in 2014 when a profit it had guaranteed the International Sevens owners did not materialise¹.

When the 2017 attendance fell, NZ Rugby, the New Zealand licence-holder, said the tournament was no longer viable. It announced a review of its options. Those options went to the international owner of the tournament, World Rugby (formerly the IRB), for discussion in April 2017. The decision was to hold the event in Hamilton.

The moral panic

In the recriminations immediately following the low 2017 turnout, the Stadium chief executive blamed the “fun police”². This was an allusion to those people behind steadily tougher rules for entry, behind low tolerance policing of the

event and the inner city, and behind criticism of the “party” atmosphere.

An analysis by Sarah Gee, of Massey University, found that discourse on the Sevens exhibited symptoms of a moral panic. A key factor was the presentation of crowd behaviour as deviant, when the people and behaviour was well within normal and relatively innocuous.

Black holes

Moral panics are “constructed phenomena” according to Sociologist Erich Goode¹. Sections of society have “intense feelings” about a “problem” or “threat” that “a sober assessment of the evidence suggests is either non-existent or considerably expected from the concrete harm”.

There is little evidence of concrete harm caused to non-attendees by the Sevens crowd. There is anecdotal evidence that some people, including attendees, found some behaviour distasteful.

The only real evidence of wrong-doing are the arrests and evictions from the Stadium, which steadily increased as Police decreased their tolerance. That was evidence concocted by the panic itself.

Moral panics gain their power because people fear standing out. Most particularly, we don’t want to be at odds with our peers – our closest social group.

There’s a strange psychological phenomenon called false consensus. We assume that others believe the dominantly expressed viewpoint of society, or of our peer group. Yet, many people won’t agree with the “consensus” – they just won’t say so.

Moral panics are “black holes” for public relations. They destroy the light of reason. When you’re on the ‘event horizon’ of the moral panic, it seems like they have a power that cannot be resisted.

¹ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/sevens/64117821/NZ-Rugby-bailout-Wellington-union-in-bid-to-save-sevens>

² <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/sevens/88921369/sevens-hung-out-to-dry-by-tougher-liquor-laws-says-westpac-stadium-boss>

Gee identifies the start of the panic in a weekend newspaper opinion column in 2010. Prior to that point the Sevens was a wildly successful phenomenon, marvelled at for its “carnival-like” atmosphere. Within three years of that article it became acceptable, and even mandatory for establishment figures, to criticise the crowd behaviour.

The key was isolation of alcohol consumption as the cause. Gee identifies a movement against alcohol over that period. Family violence and youth misbehaviour was said to be a result of a national binge-drinking culture.

This gave moral currency to those opposing the Sevens, which effectively dragged in people from the Establishment. To show you were opposed to the New Zealand “drinking culture” you needed to declare against crowd behaviour at the Sevens.

A Health Promotion Agency illustrated the nature of the movement connecting alcohol and sport in a 2013 report. It claimed 92 per cent of participants at the Wellington Sevens agreed that they were at the event for the atmosphere. Ninety per cent said alcohol consumption was part of that atmosphere.

By the 2014 event, the mixed messages event were institutionalised. The organisers were embracing and encouraging the Party, and the Establishment was warning against misbehaviour³.

Media attention on alcohol issues regularly included the Sevens as an illustration of the problem⁴, and highlighted those people who disliked the spectacle⁵.

It became common for the City establishment to claim that while they

³ <http://www.newshub.co.nz/sport/wellington-sevens-costumes-may-get-soggy-2014020705>

⁴ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/80202091/last-drinks-figures-show-where-wellingtonians-booze-before-crime>

⁵ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/9701020/Costumes-winner-won-t-come-back-to-sevens-hell>

weren't against a party, the Sevens went “too far”, “something had to be done”, and “more had to be done”⁶.

Mayor Celia Wade-Brown said “we do need to clamp down on those people that abuse alcohol”. Shop owners and members of the public were picked out by media to back up stories that the CBD had endured “Sevens hell”⁷.

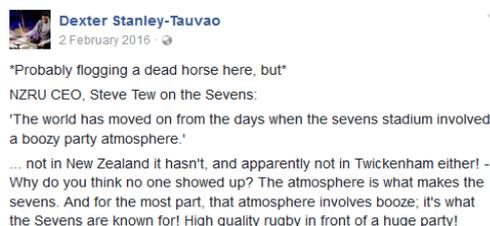
Police Inspector John Spence told the Dominion-Post that “too many people were intoxicated at the Stadium” and directly blamed the event management.

Social chatter in the city began to include behaviour at the Sevens, and people felt confident to offer opinions against what had been a success story.



Although media coverage focused on those who complained about behaviour at the event, there were far more criticisms of the attempts to stop the party.

A search of Facebook revealed at least a 5-1 ratio of comments in favour of the party atmosphere. The fan experience of 2014 and 2015 events generated a lot of fan dissent against the new crowd management format⁸.



⁶ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&obj&ctid=11198908

⁷ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/sevens/9702511/Sin-bin-for-Sevens-after-drunken-antics>

⁸ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff-nation/assignments/wellington-sevens-up-for-it-or-over-it/11179081/Don-t-let-the-Wellington-Sevens-fun-police-ruin-it>

The Stadium's annual report for 2014 said the Sevens was victim of a "wider societal shift in attitudes regarding excess consumption of alcohol"⁹.

There is no evidence that attitudes expressed by the Establishment were more widely shared. What the report was really talking about was only domination of the social agenda by a moral panic created and maintained by society's elite¹⁰.

The Police were instrumental in "proving" that a problem existed. It made sure to release statistics and testimonial about crowd behaviour, and provided subjective commentary¹¹.

In 2011, there were 16 arrests and 76 evictions at the stadium as well 61 arrests in the city after the tournament. Acting Inspector Scott Miller, of Wellington Police, said there were "a large number of intoxicated men and women within the Courtenay Place party zone".

In 2012 police reported drunken incidents were down "but more than 100 people were arrested" and 68 evicted.

In 2013, 12 people were arrested and 47 people were evicted. Police said this was unprecedented and unacceptable.

In 2014, as part of upgraded rules and policing, the Police patrolled within the Stadium looking for intoxicated people on



⁹

http://westpacstadium.co.nz/fileadmin/Documents/Annual_Reports/WRSTAR14.pdf

¹⁰ See <http://www.scoop.it/t/wellington-sevens-by-hcpe-shaw> for a collection of 'bad news' coverage

licensed premises. Unsurprisingly, they found many. There were 20 arrests and 300 evictions.

This record level of "misbehaviour" in 2014 helped the Police and the Wellington establishment create the final "evidence" they needed to deem the event irredeemable. At this point, Police were able to force the organisers into very substantial changes to admission to the grounds and to where people sat and what they did there.

The pressure continued, and by 2016 the Police presence dominated the event experience¹².

The Sevens' response

The Police said after the 2013 event that the 12 arrests and 47 people evicted from the Stadium was unprecedented and unacceptable.

Stadium CEO Shane Harmon accepted Police criticism. He blamed fans who had entered the Stadium without going through the "system". He said the event needed to have more of a focus on rugby while retaining the carnival.

A new suite of rules was introduced for the 2014 tournament. Harmon said they were "not about being the fun police." He claimed the rules were there so "everyone can have a fun, social and responsible time."

"For people who drink way too much – the message is simple – be prepared to miss what will be a great event as you won't get in."

¹¹ <http://wellington.scoop.co.nz/?p=64269>

¹² <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/national/sevens-fans-turned-away-after-breath-test>

Police patrolled within the Stadium looking for intoxicated people on licensed premises. There was another unprecedented level of arrests and ejections – 20 arrests and 300 evictions.

In doing what the police wanted, the Seven's organisers provided "evidence" for the mounting Establishment moral panic. Moreover, they were still criticised for their management. To their credit, Wellington Sevens general manager Marty Donoghue said he was "disappointed" with police for criticising the event, and Harmon claimed the crowd was the "best behaved" to date¹³.

But that was as far as resistance went. When the organisers submitted for a liquor licence for the 2015 event, they kow-towed even further to the critics. They submitted a new and even more stringent plan for alcohol and behaviour management.

Donoghue was now on-message. He claimed the new approach was about "an experience for the fans"¹⁴.

They changed how much alcohol fans could buy, and "improved" monitoring of fan intoxication on entry and during the day. They changed ticket prices and seating to attract families and people who wanted to watch the rugby.

They hauled out the unassailable Jonah Lomu, who claimed the rules were all about securing the Sevens in the Olympics.

The plan included earlier start times than previous years on Friday and Saturday (12pm kick-off) and an earlier finish time on Friday night (last game kick-off at 9pm). It includes free water, increased

food options and an expanded selection of drinks – including non-alcoholic. There will also be refresh zones for those who need a break from the main festivities.

Even if the Stadium was of a mind to defend its customers, NZ Rugby was not. Managers of the sport were already under sustained criticism for alcohol-induced behaviour of its players¹⁵.

There were countless publicised instances of drunken antics by rugby players^{16,17}. Judging from its tendency to apologise for and punish players for their non-work related activities^{18,19}, NZ Rugby agreed with, or felt it must agree with, the critics of its players' entertainment choices. In the slippery continuum of social morality, rugby management could not defend Sevens crowds without inviting further criticism of its commitment to stopping New Zealand's "drinking culture".

The key factor here is the belief of the Seven's organisers that they must act in favour of the criticism from people who were speaking out in public. The number of these people is unknown, but they were certainly "prominent" members of the community. In contrast, there was no public groundswell against the event, and 30,000 of the public were attending the event.

The 2015 event was a watershed. Until that point the organisers had tried to ameliorate the critics. It hadn't stopped criticism – it had even added to it. For the 2015 and 2016 events, the organisers joined their critics completely. In their own words, they "collaborated" with the critics to redesign the event to discourage the party lovers from turning up²⁰.

¹³ <http://en.espn.co.uk/sevens-2013-14/rugby/story/214213.html>

¹⁴

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&objectid=11317933

¹⁵ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/on-the-inside/306690/whistle-blown-on-days-of-the-%27third-half%27>

¹⁶ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/super-rugby/77690788/All-Black-Owen-Franks-opens-up-on-NZs-crazy-binge-drinking-culture>

¹⁷

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&objectid=11717666

¹⁸

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&objectid=10873623

¹⁹ <https://www.odt.co.nz/sport/rugby/rugby-watchdog-urges-nzru-action-booze>

²⁰

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/sevens/70066893/Sobering-stuff-Its-make-or-break-for-the-Wellington-Sevens>

NZ Rugby said “Wellington Sevens’ tournament organisers, event security, Westpac Stadium, New Zealand Police and Wellington City Council **have collaborated on a plan** to provide a safe and fun environment for fans”²¹

Sevens Wellington General Manager Steve Dunbar confirmed the collusion.

“We’ve been working with police, council and stadium security to do all we can to keep this great event fun and social.

“We’ve listened to what fans and the community want and are doing all we can to meet everyone’s needs. We don’t want the fun ruined by a minority who take it too far.

“Our commitment to fans is very clear we’re rolling out the red carpet for Sevens fans and saying, ‘come along and join the fun’”.

They didn’t. The old customers had been chastised, brow-beaten and arrested, and didn’t turn up for more. The new customers, whoever they were, did not respond. Tickets for the 2015 were very slow in selling²², and in 2016 attendance was only at half capacity.

Public musing began on whether the event was doomed. NZ Rugby had a sort of collective denial. NZ Rugby’s boss was reduced to saying “I wouldn’t call it a disaster”²³.

By 2017 the police were finally happy. They called the crowd “well behaved” and there were only two arrests, and 55 people ejected or turned away. There were also less than 18,000 people through the gates over the two days. Assuming these were largely returnees, the number of individuals attending was more like 10,000 – less than a third of capacity.

²¹ <http://www.allblacks.com/News/26449/sevens-wellington-ready-to-welcome-fans-with-new-initiatives>

²² <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/sevens/65792422/wellington-sevens-struggling-to-fill-westpac-stadium>

²³ <http://www.scmp.com/sport/rugby/sevens/article/1908651/ne>

What went wrong

Conceding that there was a behaviour and alcohol problem tacitly accepted the need for curbs on these factors. That meant conspiring with the moral panic to suppress factors key to the event’s success. When they did, the event lost popularity.

Because the event was an alcohol-imbibing outrageous party, these factors would be a feature. If you remove these features, you remove the Party. You remove the party, you remove the event.

A common response recommended by public relations “experts” is to concede some ground – accept criticism and modify.

This was the first route tried by the organisers. It didn’t work. It accepted that alcohol consumption and behaviour was out of the ordinary and therefore a problem.

This emboldened and legitimised critics. Without the organisers’ backing, no one was standing up for the event’s punters.

Without any defence of the relatively innocuous and common standard of drinking and behaviour, the complaints were not challenged and moderated.

The next route was total collaboration with critics. The organisers introduced rules and components to the event pandered to the idea that it was possible to create a new product and attract new customers²⁴.

The critics had no skin in the event. The success or failure of the event would not be their responsibility, and would have no direct impact on them. Their objectives were different. They were motivated by factors such as changing alcohol

²⁴ http://westpacstadium.co.nz/fileadmin/Documents/Annual_Reports/WRSTAR15.pdf

consumption or attitudes, undermining rugby, signalling virtue to peers, or gaining political advantage or media air-time.

Standing up for yourself

The mistakes of the Sevens organisers:

1. Believing in consensus and trying satisfy everyone.

- We live in a pluralistic society; people don't agree on stuff. That's why all of us prioritise our energy and targets in trying to be liked or satisfy the needs of others.
- Sports have fans. Businesses have customers. These are the people who count most because they fund your income. There are people who might become fans or customers. They matter because they could improve your income. There are people who dislike your business, your industry, and making money. They only matter in so far as they can harm your interests.

2. Not identifying the actual risk

- The stakeholders in this case may have been able to harm the interests of the Wellington Sevens, but there were no legal or ownership levers to do that. And it was never threatened. The most the critics had was use of the 'bully pulpit'.

3. Believing criticism *in* public is the same as criticism *by* the public.

- Criticism in public is noise from special interests. These are not likely to include many, if any, customers. Noise in public is a lot easier to make in our era of rapid news turnover, tendency to extremes of expression, and the ease of expressing outrage via social media.
- Organisations should only be worried by criticism from significant portions of active customers and /or the mainstream public. This signals

that sentiment is changing and you need to adjust.

The lessons from the Wellington Sevens are:

1. The strategy of modifying to mollify criticism may not work
2. The strategy of collaborating with critics and stakeholders to change your product or your customers, may not work
3. It is entirely possible to lose your whole business, product or customer-base, by listening to critics
4. Thus, the starting position must first be to defend what you do, and who you do it for. The objective must be to keep your customers in the face of criticism from other parts of society.

Concessions are the easiest response and buy time, but can ultimately be a losing strategy. Pandering to society's squeaky wheels rather than defending your customers can kill your business.

The challenge is to destroy the flimsy foundations of moral panic by providing counter evidence and speaking out. This emboldens other customers, and undermines the validity of going along with the consensus.

They ought to have positioned critics as a small group, and in the case of the Police, servants of the public, not guardians. In public and private the event organisers should have fought for the right of the public to Party. They could have reached out to customers of other events, showing how the Elite's attitude could affect them.

There is also a fundamental principle at stake about society. It is arguable that the organisers did not exercise their moral and professional duty to these groups to represent their interests.

A business maxim for our hyper-sensitive times, when consensus is dead, should be to act in the interests of your audience, not your peers.