The Public Reputation of AFL Umpires

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Abstract

It is alleged that AFL umpires have a poor reputation among the general AFL public, which is affecting umpire recruitment. The Australian Football League (AFL), by its own admission, has a perceived brand problem in relation to umpires and is struggling to meet the demands for more umpires in non-professional competitions.

This paper aims to identify the current reputation for AFL field umpires and what are the determinants that contribute to this reputation. This information can provide guidance for public relations strategies to improve umpire reputation, and ultimately the AFL brand.

Key words: Brand, Reputation, AFL Umpires, Public Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Reputation is defined as the estimation in which a person or thing is held by the community or the public generally (Macquarie, 1991). More specifically, organisational (corporate) reputation refers to the esteem in which the organisation is held by its public and stakeholders (Beder, 2002; L’Etang, 2008). The management of an organisation’s reputation is often the responsibility of public relations and can significantly contribute to the success of an organization (Harrison, 2007, L’Etang, 2008). Scott and Walsham (2005) look at the gap between what an organisation promises (brand) and what it delivers (reputation). The risk to reputation is when the gap becomes significant, and can lead to an organisation’s reputation being damaged (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

This paper investigates the Australian Football League (AFL) public’s perception of the game’s field umpires in general. It aims to establish the reputation AFL field umpires as a collective group have within the football public, and investigates determinants on why the particular reputation exists. The reason for the investigation of umpire reputation is to ascertain if in fact there is a reputation problem, which may be a contributing factor to declining AFL umpire recruitment across all levels of the game. To the author’s knowledge, an objective and open survey on the AFL public’s perceptions of umpiring performance has not been completed in the last five years.

The public reputation of AFL umpires is a public relations issue, as many of the perceptions and opinions relating to the umpires are formed through media and the AFL Corporation’s publicity. If there are identified problems with aspects of the umpires’ reputation, the AFL may need to reconsider the strategies it currently supports for influencing public perception on umpire performance.

‘Australian Rules’ football is a game peculiar to Australia and was recognised as a unique sport with its own rules in 1858 (AFL, 2010). It is the most popular spectator sport in terms of attendance and television viewing in Australia and generates the highest annual revenue for any sport within Australia. The AFL is the governing body for ‘Australian Rules’ football.

The AFL as a corporation is a ‘big’ business. An important element of this professional sport is the game-day officiating, which is predominantly adjudicated by the central, or field, umpires. Umpires play an important role in ensuring the rules of the game are upheld. Therefore, the umpires form an integral part of the corporate brand that is the AFL, which also has implications for the financial success of the sport. Many
AFL fans are exposed to the umpire performances on a weekly basis; as spectators or through traditional and social media. The umpires are the game-day representation of the AFL administration, and therefore contribute to the sport’s overall reputation. It is in the interests of the AFL to ensure the umpires are held in high regard.

This paper examines key determinants on why AFL umpires have acquired a certain reputation, based on the football public’s perceptions regarding: performance, consistency in interpretation, the number of rules, the use of technology, and the playing background of umpires. Information is primarily sourced from the results of an online survey investigating the reputation of AFL umpires. However, a review of contemporary media regarding AFL umpiring and a personal case study on being an AFL umpire contribute to the research.

For the purpose of this paper the acronym AFL refers to all Australian Rules football and the AFL league refers to the national professional competition. This paper specifically investigates the reputation of field umpires, with the term ‘umpire’ referring to the person responsible for ensuring that the game is played in accordance with the rules (Macquarie, 1991). The research is based on investigating the perceptions of the AFL public, which includes: officials, players, spectators and journalists.

WHY UMPIRE REPUTATION IS IMPORTANT

The AFL is a corporation, as it is a united body working towards a business enterprise (Macquarie, 1991). Stakeholders in the AFL include corporate staff, players, team administration, spectators and game administration (AFL, 2010). The corporate brand is what the stakeholders are expecting the organisation to deliver. The perceptions that are shaped over time by stakeholders’ experiences, along with the media, culminate in the public cumulative judgment of the organisation that defines the organisation’s delivery on its promises - its reputation (Beder, 2002; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; L’Etang, 2008). Umpires, as a representation of the AFL administration, contribute to the AFL’s brand. The regard in which umpires are held can contribute considerably to the AFL’s overall reputation.

The AFL brand, by virtue of being the largest supported sport within Australia, holds significant importance from a financial, social and ethical perspective. AFL games in 2009 had an attendance of nearly seven million (footywire, 2010). The viewing of television broadcasts for the games average between 2.9 and 5.3 million people per weekend during the season (thinktv, 2007). The AFL generates immense interest and wealth with annual revenue of more than $215 million and a current television deal worth $780 million over five years (N.B. forecast to exceed $1 billion for the next broadcast rights contract), and more than 300,000 media stories per year (convictcreations, 2010). Another expanding component to the impact of AFL is gambling, with millions of dollars wagered each week against game results (Munro, 2010). The AFL also significantly influences social and ethical issues for Australian society through its support for community and regional football development, and its very public policies on equality and racism (AFL, 2010; Munro, 2010).

Delivering on the AFL brand has considerable implications, in terms of social and financial support. AFL umpires play a strong part in the representation of the AFL brand to attendees and viewing spectators on game-days. The experiences that spectators, players, team administrators and the media have of umpires define the umpires’ general reputation. The AFL public’s perceptions on the way umpires are delivering on their role as the adjudicators for the game will ultimately contribute to defining the AFL’s reputation. The risk to the AFL’s reputation is that the public perceives umpires are not performing to a suitable level. It is critical to maintaining the AFL brand and improving umpire recruitment that umpires sustain a positive reputation.
THE ISSUES WITH UMPIRING

There are a number of issues identified by the author that may influence the way umpires are perceived by the AFL public. These include: the number of rules, personal interpretation by individual umpires, personal interpretation by spectators, media interpretation of the rules and the use of technology.

The official ‘Laws of Australian Football’ booklet is around 90 pages long (AFL, 2009). A game in the AFL league is adjudicated by three field umpires, who interpret these rules and make decisions in the area of the field for which they are the controlling umpire (AFL, 2009). Because the game is reliant on adjudication, many in-play decisions relating to the rules are the sole responsibility of the field umpire in control at the time. Other field umpires can make decisions regarding open play, or can consult with the controlling umpire regarding their interpretation on infringements they have seen (AFL, 2009). However, the controlling umpire makes decisions based on the laws and rules spread over 90 pages of text; a text that is updated every year. The dichotomy umpires face with these interpretations of the rules is the umpires own understanding against the interpretations of passionate supporters.

Each umpire has their own intrapersonal communication that affects the way they decode the play in relation to the rules of the game (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee, 2008). This is the inner-debate that umpires go through during the split-second decision-making process for an occurrence in the game. The umpire’s construction of reality at that particular moment, which is influenced by their knowledge, social, cultural and emotional experiences, has an impact on their interpretation for each occurrence in the game (Searle, 1995). Constructions of reality are obviously going to be peculiar to each individual umpire. This can lead to subtle differences in the interpretation of the rules by the three umpires, leading to the perception by spectators and viewers of inconsistent decision-making.

This is compounded by the fact that each of the individuals who attend AFL league game (on average 36,000 each game) has their own intrapersonal communication debate going on within themselves, and each is influenced by their own construction of reality on the decisions made by the umpires at that game (convictcreations, 2009, Searle, 1995). Most spectators support a particular team involved in the game, which likely results in an emotionally-charged bias towards their supported team (Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003). On any given decision that is reliant on the interpretation of the umpire, there is most likely going to be at least two opposing desires on the outcome for that decision.

All these variances in interpretation can have a profound impact on the way AFL umpires are perceived to have performed in their role of applying the rules of AFL to the game. The umpires’ reputation is inherently hedged against the AFL public’s perception of their decision-making competence.

The media are also a major contributor to the public reputation of AFL umpires. The traditional media play a significant role in defining what is topical, especially in sport (Harrison, 2007). Areas relating to umpiring that are highlighted and discussed by the media provide the information for which the AFL public base their own opinions on. The influence traditional media has on the public’s opinion relating to topical issues is well documented (L’Etang, 2008). Should there be an identified problem with umpire reputation as it is represented through the media, then the AFL need to address their media relations’ strategies for umpires.

Although the media can have a propensity to highlight those issues that are sensational, AFL umpiring is yet to embrace technology at the elite level of the game that may eliminate many of the contentious decisions that the media focus on. The use of technology in elite sport has successfully been adopted by many professional sports including tennis, American football, cricket and rugby league (Gardner, James, O’Leary & Welch, 2006).
THE AFL’S CURRENT PERCEPTION ON UMPIRING

The AFL appears to take the position that the general reputation of umpires is not as positive as it desires in order to protect the AFL brand. The AFL states on their website and through media releases that 20-25 per cent of umpires are giving up umpiring every year, due mainly to poor match day environments as a result of abuse and disrespect (AFL, 2010; Burgen, 2010). Participation numbers for AFL players is on the rise and it is forecast the gap between umpire supply and demand could exceed 20,000 by 2013 (Lane, 2010). The AFL has implemented a number of promotional strategies and policies to influence the football public’s opinion. They are working hard on improving the perception of umpires with initiatives such as: appreciation for umpires, fast-tracking ex-AFL players to elite umpiring status, and limiting negative comments about umpiring by AFL personnel to the media.

The AFL has recognised that public relations can have a major impact for the football public’s perception for the reputation of umpires. ‘Umpire Appreciation Round’ and the ‘Umpiring is Everyone’s Business’ campaign are acknowledgements by the AFL that all is not acceptable with the reputation of umpires, and that a cultural change towards AFL umpires needs to occur (AFL, 2010, AFLUA, 2010). The challenge to cultural change may be compounded by Australia’s colonial heritage and its associated distrust and dislike of all representation of authority, which can be automatically assigned until proven otherwise (Fernanda, 2008). The ‘Umpire Appreciation Round’ was held in round four of the AFL home-and-away season in 2010 and was encouraged across all AFL leagues. It involved umpires and team officials, including coaches, shaking hands before the start of the match. The campaign ‘Umpiring is Everyone’s Business’ run by the AFL from round eight onwards emphasises that everyone involved in Australian Football – umpires, coaches, players, administrators, parents and supporters - has a role to play in creating a positive match-day environment (AFL, 2010).

The AFL has put in place a protection platform for umpire reputation by stipulating that under ‘AFL Regulation 16.1:Public Comments on Umpires’ any public comment by AFL players, coaches, officials and those teams regulated by the AFL against umpires are liable for fines of up to $20,000 for a first offence (Sexton & Russell, 2009). Effectively all AFL club officials are banned from making derogative comments regarding umpiring in order to set a positive example on conduct and attitudes towards umpires.

A deliberate step by the AFL to raise the perceived connection between umpires and players is to target and fast track ex-AFL players to the elite level of umpiring. The AFL umpiring department has joined forces with the AFL Players Association in an attempt to recruit former players to AFL league umpiring. The AFL has established the new ‘Player to Umpire Pathway Academy’, which helps to identify former players suitable to furthering their AFL careers through umpiring. AFL Umpiring Director, Jeff Gieschen, indicated that recently-retired players were extremely attractive to the AFL as potential umpires because they already had an understanding of elite sport, had achieved high levels of fitness and were used to the pressures associated with elite level sport (Bradshaw, 2010). Only four ex-elite players have made the transition to top-tier umpiring since 1945 (MacFarlane, 2010).

The AFL is obviously aware that positive promotion is crucial to upholding a positive reputation for umpires. The author’s own experiences as an AFL umpire in the Eastern Football League (EFL) situated in the eastern zone of Melbourne have highlighted some of the hurdles to establishing a strong reputation for the AFL umpiring fraternity. Inconsistencies do exists between umpires, particularly in relation to their fitness, maturity, playing background and umpire training. To deliver consistent decision-making and interpretation from such an eclectic mix of umpires from week-to-week is a challenging expectation.

There are many issues that may play a part in influencing the AFL public’s perception of how well the umpires carry out their role. The remainder of this paper will investigate some of these perceptions.
HYPOTHESIS

The AFL umpires’ reputation, as adjudicators of football games, with its public is effectively diminished due to the gap between expectation and perception as a result of one or a combination of the following criteria:

- The rules are open to different interpretations between field umpires
- Too many rules in the game
- Too many umpires on the field in charge of the game
- Lack of technology to aid decisions
- Lack of umpires who come from a high-level playing background

METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted through three methods:

1. An online survey of the AFL public to gather information regarding their perceptions of umpiring and the rules;
2. Personal reflections from a practising umpire in order to relate directly with players and crowd perceptions; and
3. An analysis of published media articles to gain an understanding of the information many AFL fans base and formulate their opinions on.

1. The online survey was made available through a link and was distributed amongst the AFL public via email requests and posting on club websites and supporters’ social media sites. The survey was made live on June 17, 2010. The survey was temporarily closed on July 9, 2010 with results-to-date analysed for the purpose of this paper. The aim was to have more than 300 responses to the survey from a range of AFL enthusiasts with a mixture of playing, age, gender and social backgrounds.

The 14-question survey (see appendix one) includes three demographic questions, one open-ended comment section, and 10 Likert scale questions relating to the performance of the umpires and the current structure of adjudicating a game of AFL football. The questions were designed to provide quantitative data relating to the above hypothesis. The open-ended question provided an opportunity to record any qualitative feedback from responders.

2. The author has also conducted a personal case study into the role of being an AFL umpire in a semi-professional league. A diary has been kept from 18 February throughout the 2010 EFL season. It diarises the training, practice matches and league games that the author was involved with and was a spectator at. Key input revolved around training methods, the umpire squad, demographic make-up and match-day interaction with players, officials and spectators.

3. For the purposes of reviewing the possible influence by traditional media on public perceptions for AFL umpires, all articles released between June 25, 2009 and June 25, 2010 through the ‘Herald Sun’ and ‘The Age’ (the two major Melbourne newspapers) that directly related to umpiring were categorised as either a positive, neutral or negative mention. The reviewed articles had a strong link to umpires or umpiring.
LIMITATIONS TO RESEARCH

The survey relied heavily on social media for distribution. Due to the nature of social media interaction and the genre of the text, a formal statement of intent (as a condition of ethics clearance) that must preface the actual survey may have been a deterrent to those people who use social media sites (Mohan, et al. 2008, L’Etang, 2008). Social media sites specific to AFL football, like forums and blogs such as: bigfooty.com, realfooty.com.au, often target particular aspects of the game and specific incidents that have occurred in recent weeks. The idea of a general survey often did not suit the theme of the blogs and could have been perceived as less appropriate to the readership of that site (Harrison & Hirst, 2006; L’Etang, 2008). Therefore, overall response numbers to date for survey (currently 206) were lower than originally hoped.

The survey did not offer incentives or prizes as a means to encourage greater participation. Given that a social media audience has many other similar survey opportunities that do provide incentives, this survey’s participants needed a real passion for football and/or felt the need to contribute to the knowledge surrounding AFL umpires and their performances. This may also have an effect on the balance of the given responses (Harrison & Hirst, 2006).

SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results and analysis below refer to the 203 responses for the survey as at July 8, 2010.

The results indicate that AFL umpires are perceived to do an ‘excellent’ (five per cent), ‘good’ (47 per cent), or ‘average’ (35 per cent) job at interpreting the rules of AFL football. Only 11 per cent thought the umpires did a ‘below average’ job, and only two per cent responded that it was ‘poor’. When the respondents were asked how they thought others viewed the umpires’ performance, 42 per cent responded ‘good’ and 43 per cent responded ‘average’. From these results it can be stated that most people believe the umpires do a ‘good’ or ‘average’ job of adjudicating a game of AFL football.

There were 47 percent of respondents indicating 4-6 mistakes are made per game and 27 per cent stating mistakes happen less than three times a game. AFL umpires are primarily judged on their game decisions, of which 85.9 per cent of these decisions are deemed to be correct by the AFL umpiring director (Warner, 2010). A typical game involves 37 interpretive decisions, meaning the umpires are deemed to make five mistakes a game on average, in keeping with the survey results (AFL Statistics, 2010).

More than 70 per cent believe that field umpires can interpret the rules differently to each other, with only 27 per cent believing this doesn’t happen. This reflects the research regarding intrapersonal differences in communication that exists between all umpires and the resultant effect this has on their constructs of reality during interpretation of an incident against the rules of the game (Mohan et al., 2008; Searle, 1995). The author can relate personally to this experience of sharing field umpiring in the EFL, recalling many occasions where the partner umpire has made an interpretation quite different to the author’s.

An overwhelming majority (84 per cent) responded that they find it difficult to predict what a decision will be when the umpire blows the whistle to stop play. This may reflect confusion regarding interpretation of the rules by the spectators, or confusion by the umpires in the way they interpret the rules, or both.

A small majority of 52 per cent stated they believed that there were not too many rules in AFL, where 40 per cent believed that there were. Nine per cent were unsure. The author’s personal view, upon reflection of umpiring experiences, is that the basic rules are simple enough to remember, but the constant technical applications of the rules laid down by the governing umpire body can lead to confusion over interpretation. It is widely acknowledged that the finer technical breakdown of each rule is designed to eliminate
differences in interpretation, but it is the author’s and many of the survey’s respondents’ beliefs that inconsistency results from the abundance of bi-laws associated with the basic rules (AFL, 2009).

The three field umpires per game approach is judged by survey respondents to be the right number to adjudicate an AFL game, with 63 per cent agreeing with current field umpire numbers. Only eight per cent believed the game needed more umpires, and 21 per cent indicating it needed less. From the author’s experience, believing there have been times when an extra set of umpire eyes would help improve the decision-making process in his league, which operates on two field umpires. In these circumstances, it is believed the angle of sight from a third umpire can aid in ensuring a more correct interpretation is made.

An overwhelming 73 per cent responded that video technology should not be introduced into AFL games. This is a surprising result, considering the high-stakes of a professional game and implications that incorrect decisions might have on gambling payouts. The use of cameras for broadcasting games already employ this technology to analyse numerous decisions in the game and many high-level sports already use such technology (Gardner et al., 2006).

The use of umpires from a high-level playing background is not a strong priority for 62 per cent of the respondents, with five per cent stating umpires shouldn’t come from playing backgrounds and 33 per cent stating they should. The author’s experience at EFL level is that the umpire mix was balanced between experienced and non-experienced players, and there are no noticeable correlations between the umpire backgrounds and interpretations.

An interesting result is that 49 per cent of respondents (a greater number than expected) contributed comments in the optional section of the survey. Many of these comments were longer than the standard one-sentence comment, with seven comments being multiple paragraphs and 63 being multiple sentences. Of these comments: 36 related to inconsistency in interpretation, 22 related to the need to revisit the rules, six referred to only paying obvious free kicks, five wanted only ex-players as umpires, five wanted umpires to be full-time professionals, two stated technology was necessary for umpiring, 18 made supporting and four made derogative statements about the umpiring standard, and two made general comments about the survey. The fact that these respondents made the extra effort to contribute ideas to the research indicates their strong desires to expand on their quantitative responses through further comments (Hakim, 1987).

A review of direct mentions for AFL umpires in the traditional media showed that 25 articles were printed in the daily Victorian newspapers of the ‘Herald Sun’ and ‘The Age’ over the 12-month review period of June 2009 – June 2010. Of those reviewed, 10 were judged to be negative or derogative about umpires or their decisions. 12 were judged to be positive or supportive about umpires and their decisions, and three made no judgment on the decisions or performances of umpires. Examples of positive topics included umpire appreciation round, umpire sponsorship, and targeting ex-players to be umpires. Negative media examples include clashing attire between umpires and players, poor decisions and poor positioning by umpires.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents (52 per cent) believe AFL field umpires do a good, or excellent, job at adjudicating football games. And the vast majority (87 per cent) rates the umpires’ performance as average or above. Even considering many of the media reports from the daily Victorian papers relating directly to umpiring focus on negative aspects, this does not seem to have had an adverse affect on the AFL public’s perception on the performance of umpires. Therefore, it can be said that the field umpires’ reputation with the AFL public is held in ‘healthy’ regard, and that the AFL do not need to make drastic changes to the way they promote their umpires’ abilities and performance.
However, what is evident from the survey results is that 70 per cent of the AFL public believes the field umpires often have different interpretations of the same rule that produces inconsistencies in decision-making. Most respondents (84 per cent) indicated they sometimes found it difficult to predict what the umpires’ interpretations would be. Different interpretation by individual umpires is in keeping with the theories behind intrapersonal communication and construction of reality. The author’s own umpiring experience reflects this belief, as a decision is often applauded by part of the crowd and disputed by another part. This is compounded by the fact the AFL has many rules and laws that are open to interpretation by one of the three adjudicating umpires at an AFL league game (AFL, 2009). This suggests the AFL need to address internal understanding for, and consistent application of, the rules across all leagues.

The number of rules and the number of umpires are not of significant concern to the respondents of the survey. Despite the acknowledgement that field umpires make different interpretations, most respondents believed three field umpires is the right amount to adjudicate the game effectively; the AFL appear to have this balance right in the public’s opinion. Most respondents also considered the current amount of rules to be appropriate for the game.

A high-level playing background for umpires and the introduction of technology to aid adjudication are not prominent areas that need to be addressed according to the majority of respondents. Even though survey results reflect that the AFL’s current approach is adequately dealing with these aspects of umpiring for the respondents, these issues still attract a strong media attention (see Survey Results and Analysis). This suggested that media relations be strengthened between mainstream media and the AFL Corporation, in particular focus on providing more insight into the interpretation that directs decision-making processes (Harrison, 2008; L’Etang, 2008).

The fact that so many respondents (more than 60 per cent) contributed to the optional comments section demonstrates that many of the survey participants have a strong desire to express their opinion on the performance of the umpires. Therefore, umpiring does play a considerable role in the AFL experience for many supporters, players and administrators, and ultimately has an influence on the AFL’s reputation. This has significant implications for the ongoing management of relationships between the AFL and its public regarding the role and performance of umpires.

This research can be strengthened by increasing the sample of respondents through gaining the AFL Corporation’s approval for distribution of the survey through their networks to the AFL public. The current sample is dominated by males (90 per cent) and respondents over 35 years old (65 per cent) and may not be an entirely accurate reflection of greater AFL public, but more directly reflect the views of those who are concerned enough to complete a survey on AFL umpires. A broader sample may address this current imbalance. An ideal sample group of 1,000 plus responses would provide stronger data for analysis (Hakim, 1987).

In conclusion, the AFL umpires’ reputation has been shown to be of an acceptable standard by its football public. Based on the results of the survey, there appears to be no significant risk to the AFL’s corporate brand as a result of the umpires’ perceived ability to effectively adjudicate games of football. Therefore, the AFL does not need to undertake any significant promotion campaign or policy change to effect a stronger reputation for its umpires.
REFERENCES


