

**PR Industry Paper:**

**Larry Mann, EVP and Partner at rEvolution Sports**

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### **Introduction**

Public relations (PR) is a dynamic, essential, and often-changing field that is necessary for its efforts to utilize strategic communication to connect businesses and brands with their audiences. As the primary authors of a brand's messaging, PR professionals are at the forefront of shaping perceptions, driving engagement, and managing reputations. In sports marketing, PR is faced with unique challenges and opportunities as brands and agencies attempt to deal with the intense passion and loyalty that drives hardcore sports fans. According to Robert L. Heath (2013), "sports public relations is a component of public relations that relies heavily on media relations, publicity, and promotion to foster the brand equity of teams, conferences, types of sports, and specific athletes."

An individual I had the privilege of talking to who has extensive experience in this industry is Larry Mann, who is an Executive Vice President (EVP) and Partner at rEvolution, an integrated sports marketing agency. With his expertise in integrating brands with sports audiences, Mann has played an important role in shaping rEvolution's approach to experiential marketing, sponsorships, and digital media. This essay will explore Mann's background, rEvolution's business strategy, Mann's contributions to rEvolution, and how his role aligns with the broader public relations field. Through this examination, I will also reflect on how the sports marketing sector differs from traditional PR and how it has influenced my understanding of the profession.

## **About Larry Mann**

Larry Mann has been a sports fan his entire life, but when he began in the sports marketing industry, it was not nearly as big of a business as it is today (L. Mann, personal communication, December 4, 2024). In 1992, Mann graduated from the University of North Carolina with a degree in Speech Communication and Rhetoric, which provided the foundation for his career in the communications industry. He then began working in media sales before moving into the sports industry with jobs at Fox Sports and ESPN before beginning his work with rEvolution in 2002 (Mann, n.d.) [LinkedIn profile]. At rEvolution, Mann oversees brand-side marketing efforts in which he helps brands see the benefits of the sports industry to promote their products before developing fully integrated marketing campaigns centered around a brand's presence the sports world.

Mann finds particular fulfillment in the constantly evolving nature of the sports marketing industry, noting that this keeps his work both challenging and engaging. He also believes that there are often misconceptions around the ease and excitement of sports marketing. Specifically, he points out that people often believe his work just consists of going to sporting events and talking to athletes, which he says is nowhere near as complex as his actual work. However, he still loves the work he does. He said, "It's a wonderful business. It's very competitive and very hard. It's not as glamorous as it looks, I don't just travel around to sporting events all the time, and when I'm there I'm working, but it's a great business" (L. Mann, personal communication, December 4, 2024).

In addition, Mann also said he gets a lot of enjoyment from working with younger people interested in sports marketing, both in a guiding role and as an opportunity to

learn more himself. He said the biggest pieces of advice he would give to younger people looking to work in the sports marketing industry is to be authentic and always be learning and networking. This applies to all forms of PR, as relationship building, authenticity, and adaptability are key pillars of strategic communications both within and outside of the sports industry.

### **About rEvolution**

rEvolution was founded in 2001 by John Rowady and describes themselves as “the largest independent brand-focused sports marketing agency serving at the intersection of brands, rightsholders, and fans” (rEvolution, n.d.). They specialize in connecting brands with sports fans through innovative strategies in experiential marketing, sponsorships, and digital media. The agency’s goal is to deliver impactful, data-driven campaigns that utilize fan engagement and brand loyalty. Headquartered in Chicago where most of the agency’s employees work, rEvolution also has offices in Detroit, Indianapolis, the United Kingdom, and Singapore, which allows them to work internationally and across a diverse range of sports and brands.

Mann notes rEvolution’s approach as providing every service necessary for a brand by working with them every step through a campaign. rEvolution has different departments specialized in matching up brands with events, athletes, or organizations, as well as developing a marketing strategy, creating a communications plan, and utilizing PR and social media to execute a campaign. For example, rEvolution led the marketing and PR strategy for the International Cricket Council’s Men’s T20 World Cup this past summer, crafting a national tour promoting the event that was developed in a collaboration between their Chicago and London offices (rEvolution, 2024) [Press

release]. Over the years, rEvolution has worked with top-tier brands, utilizing their diverse range of services to resonate with target audiences and create results for their clients. As an EVP and Partner at rEvolution, Larry Mann plays a pivotal role in shaping the agency's strategic direction, managing high-level client relationships, and overseeing major marketing campaigns.

### **Relationship with PR**

In our PRL 206 class this year, Professor Horn provided us with the Grunig and Hunt definition of public relations: "The management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Horn, 2024). This is central to sports marketing and Larry Mann's work with rEvolution, where managing the communication between brands, sports fans, and sporting organizations is the primary goal. Mann's role involves managing communication between brands and sports fans by facilitating sponsorship deals and creating engaging campaigns that speak to the emotional connection fans have with sports. His work is a direct application of Grunig and Hunt's definition of PR because it seeks to build and sustain positive relationships with specific publics: sports fans, sports organizations, and brands seeking to market themselves in the sports industry. By focusing on experiential marketing and sponsorships, sports marketing PR practitioners like Mann maintain these relationships and ensure brands remain relevant and connected to their public.

However, there are some differences from traditional public relations present in sports marketing. While traditional PR often emphasizes media outreach and reputation management, sports marketing requires a different approach where engagement and emotional connection with the audience are prioritized. In sports marketing, the focus is

on fostering emotional connections between the brand and fans, which isn't always present in other PR sectors. Another unique aspect in the sports industry is the increased scale that sports provide (Domingos, 2024). For example, major events like the Super Bowl or the World Cup provide brands an unparalleled opportunity to connect with their public on a global scale by turning fans' passion for the event into a tool for building brand awareness and loyalty. A sponsorship at a major sports event, such as a company sponsoring halftime entertainment, allows fans to associate the excitement of the game with the brand, creating a deeper emotional connection than a traditional PR campaign might achieve.

In his entry on Sports Public Relations in his “Encyclopedia of Public Relations,” Robert Heath points to crisis communication, marketing skills, deep knowledge of sports and the industry around them, and writing skills as essential for success in the sports marketing industry (Heath, 2013). Mann points to authenticity and networking skills, as well as noting the importance that social media now plays in his work. He told a story of asking one of their specialized PR employees to pitch a story through traditional media about a new campaign with a name, image, and likeness (NIL) company. He said he was basically told to “shove it” and instead focus on a social media campaign (L. Mann, personal communication, December 4, 2024).

### **Reflection on Expectations of PR**

Overall, my conversation with Larry Mann and further research into sports marketing has been very informative and engaging, and I learned a lot that has both affirmed and contradicted some of my previous perceptions of strategic communications within the sports industry. Going into the interview, I expected most of

the work in sports marketing to be done on behalf of either athletes, teams, or organizations. At rEvolution they do some work on behalf of those organizations, but also do plenty of work with brands to find ways to allow them to market within the sports industry. I think that's a cool wrinkle of Mann's work that I had not previously considered very much. One belief of mine that was affirmed by my conversation with Mann was the ever-changing, fast-paced nature of the communications industry. Hearing him reinforce that was not necessarily surprising, but it is a nice reminder to me of how engaging this industry can be and the unique challenges and opportunities it can provide.

One thing that Mann told me that I really liked was his experience at this year's Maui Invitational over the week of Thanksgiving. The Maui Invitational is a yearly college basketball tournament that takes place in Hawaii. As an avid college basketball fan, Mann was able to attend this year, but also told me that he was still working during the duration of his trip, even while attending games. I thought that was a great illustration of the uniqueness of the sports marketing industry, where you can have super fun opportunities to attend events such as the Maui Invitational, but also must be sure to remain diligent and hard-working even while attending those events to continue to create those chances. I knew the sports marketing industry was one that I was very interested in pursuing before writing this paper, and that is still reinforced now after my research and conversation with Mann.

By having the opportunity to talk to Mann, I was able to learn much more about this industry and am still very excited to pursue options of working in it. From Larry Mann's career trajectory to his integral role in advancing rEvolution's mission, the discussion underscored the significance of adaptability, relationship management, and

creative campaign creation in sports communications. The work of professionals like Larry Mann highlights how PR can be a bridge between brands and their audiences, creating trust, loyalty, and impactful storytelling. As the field of sports marketing continues to evolve, public relations professionals will remain at the forefront, using innovation and storytelling to create meaningful connections between brands and their audiences.

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