

Sunday Red or Red Flags: A Case Study Analysis of Tiger Woods' Infidelities and Scandals

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Tiger Woods, a name that carries a reputation of glory, prominence, and unparalleled talent. An incredible prodigy that in turn grew into one of the greatest golfers of our time. For years Woods has dominated the scene, becoming a professional at the age of 20. Now holding 82 PGA Tour wins and five Masters Tournament titles, he's tied for the title of most decorated golfer on the PGA Tour. His talent has never been questioned, but a man who could only be described as loyal, committed, and determined, has a layer of secret, adultery, and scandalous behavior. The top player in the world in 2009, Tiger had no idea that he would have his entire world ripped out from under him while on Thanksgiving break with his family. By having his entire personal life on display and open for scrutiny, Tiger's nefarious behavior off the range would forever change his reputation and set a precedent for adulterous athletes for years to come.

On November 27th, 2009, at 2:30 a.m. Tiger Woods crashed his Cadillac Escalade into a fire hydrant followed by a neighbor's tree just yards away from his Florida home. The media went into a frenzy, Woods and his family under a microscope as rumors buzzed. Two days before the accident, The National Enquirer published a story claiming Tiger Woods was having an affair with a woman named Rachel Uchitel. Woods chose not to comment on the matter, but on Thanksgiving evening Woods' wife, Elin Nordegren called Uchitel from Woods' cell phone after discovering romantic text messages. When this news reached the media the story went from an accidental car accident to a full fledged infidelity affair. Elin was found at the scene with a golf club, her and Woods' both claiming she had used it to smash the back windows of his car to help him get out, but media soon speculated she had been chasing him with it after her call in which Uchitel had answered the phone with "hey babe," (Harris, 2021). Tiger remained silent until November 29th, stating that the situation was his fault and that the "malicious rumors" circulating the media about his marriage and family were "irresponsible," (Bernstein, 2012,

Table 1). Putting spin on his story to protect his reputation caused Woods' small scandal to evolve into a full fledged PR crisis, taking an approach that put him under fire and lose respect within his field.

Over the following months, Tiger Woods would go on to release seven more statements regarding the events of November 27th, 2009, and the moments that had led up to it. In his third statement on December 11th, Woods finally took responsibility for his actions of cheating on Elin. This 15 day delay in the truth, and his eventual admission of guilt, officially put America's favorite golfer on public trial. On February 19th, 2010, Woods would finally speak directly to the public in person in hopes to signal the end of this acute crisis. However, two more statements would be made followed by his eighth and final statement on August 23rd, 2010, where he and Elin announced their finalized divorce and plans to co-parent.

Well thought out crisis management plans are the heart of good public relations. Being that he was one of the greatest golfers in the world at the time, Tiger Woods' PR team made crucial mistakes in 2009 that ultimately led to a tarnished reputation of the golf star. The timing of the first statement was within 48 hours of the accident, because of the nature of the people involved and the level of harm caused, the time frame was acceptable, but the quality of the statement wasn't. Tiger's biggest mistake was putting spin on the truth in terms of his affair instead of admitting or not necessarily downright denying the truth. In this statement on November 29th, 2009, Tiger specifically states, "Although I understand there is curiosity, the many, false, unfounded and malicious rumors that are currently circulating about my family and me are irresponsible," (Bernstein, 2012, Table 1). Handling such a high profile case with outright denial instead of accountability set the precedent for the way Tiger's PR team handled the rest of this case. His team would go on to publish seven more statements that were versions of the truth,

stringing the public on and in turn running Woods' name through the muck. If I were to fix this case as Tiger's PR practitioner, I would start by taking the challenge head on and having him admit and come clean about the affair immediately. Obviously Tiger and Elin were attempting to save their marriage, but when you are in the public eye, truth is a vessel for good relations. Next I would keep the statements to a minimum, the sheer amount of comments made by Tiger and his team was overwhelming and hard for the public to follow. I did appreciate the press conference Tiger's PR team had him attend. Because of his stature and well-known nature I believe that the video allowed for people to connect with Tiger and feel deeply for him and his situation. Having him apologize publicly and not just through a written note shows vulnerability and human connectivity. I truly believe this video is one of the reasons that Tiger Woods' reputation wasn't immediately shot by this incident. Lastly I would encourage Tiger as his PR practitioner to keep his comments following the original statement and video to a minimum. Side chatter, unprepared interviews, and jokes regarding the matter take what has been a formal and well thought out apology and turn it into a joke that re-ignites the scandal. Keeping professionalism at the forefront of the incident is of utmost importance.

Thankfully, even though the approach his PR team took was horrendous, Tiger Woods' social status kept him in the game and an American hero even after the events he endured in 2009 and 2010. Had Tiger not been as talented and loved by the public at the time of his scandals it is extremely plausible that the approach he took to regain the public trust would have blown up in his face, ruining his career. However, his classic Sunday red and hard hitting approach to every course he steps foot on may just have saved his skin. In 2019, Tiger Woods won the Masters and the moment was deemed his 'Return to Glory.' The event was heavily televised and symbolized his ultimate return to the apple of the public's eye.

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