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PRL 206

28 April 2025

## PR Industry Paper

### **Get to know your interviewee a bit:**

Sam Shannon is the Corporate Communications Manager of the New Orleans Saints. Shannon always knew that he wanted to work in the sports industry, as sports was something he always enjoyed, although he was initially unsure of the exact career path he wanted to pursue. He attended the University of Kentucky, where he majored in communications. One day, he went to the athletics department to see if they had any jobs available his freshman year. He ended up getting an internship in his school's athletic department where he worked many events in sports such as football, basketball, and gymnastics. Due to this internship, he ended up learning how these teams operate from a PR perspective. In his senior year of college, his boss at the athletics department sent him to the NFL Combine in Indianapolis. He was not sure if he wanted to work in the NFL, but he decided to keep an open mind. Along with about 150 other seniors in college, Shannon handed out his resume to several people and teams who were working at the combine. The Los Angeles Rams ended up reaching out to him, where he was a PR intern for about a year. He ended up having a contact in New Orleans that knew of a job opening, where he interned for the Saints for nine months before being hired full time. Shannon has now been working for the Saints for eight years.

When asked what Sam Shannon likes about working in communications, he stated that he enjoys how each day to day is different. He described how he is not just working at a desk doing

the same things everyday, but is involved in many different things that allow him to have a versatile day to day experience. He explained that working in Public Relations is a “relationship business” and how he gets to get to know many different people and build many different relationships. Especially since he works in sports for a professional team, he gets to interact with several people who are in different departments from him. For example, he stated how he has gotten to meet so many great people and build relationships with people who are not even in the communications department, but just people who work around the office.

Additionally, Shannon advised that someone who is interested in working in Public Relations, especially in sports, should be open to any opportunity that is given and to get involved early. For instance, he did not think he would be working for the NFL, but he took the initial opportunity and ended up loving what he does. He explained that everyone needs help, so do not be afraid to reach out to organizations. If he had not originally gone up to the athletics departments at his University and asked if they had any job opportunities, he would not be where he is today. Additionally, he stated that if one wanted a career in communications, that their grades are not as important as the relationships that they build along the way. This being said, he advised to get involved as early and to get as much experience as possible.

**Describe their organization:**

Sam Shannon works for the New Orleans Saints. The Saints are a professional football team based in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Saints were established in 1967 and are part of the National Football League, NFL, where they compete in the NFC South division. The team is currently owned by Gayle Benson, and was previously owned by Tom Benson before passing away in 2018. The Saints training facility is located in Metairie, Louisiana where the teams

practices and employees, including the PR team, work, and the Saints play at Ceaser Superdome where several fans, known as the “Who-Dat Nation,” come to watch the games.

The Saints are deeply embedded in the history of New Orleans, not only through their performance where they have attended several playoff games and won Superbowl XLIV, but also through their deep commitment to the New Orleans community. The Saints are seen as a symbol of resilience, unity, and pride for the city. Especially following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the team and its return to the Superdome became a powerful source of hope and recovery for residents of New Orleans, especially those strongly affected by Katrina.

Through certain programs such as the Saints Community Assistance Fund, player-led foundations, and numerous youth engagement projects, the team supports causes ranging from education, health and wellness, to disaster relief and social justice. Players, coaches, and staff often participate in service projects, school visits, and fundraising events. For example, well known Saints player, Cameron Jordan, is often visiting schools and supporting organizations that resonate with him. This goes to show that the Saints are not just a sports team, but an organization that is passionate about the better good and well being of others. The Saints' are also involved with partnerships with local nonprofits like the Gleason Foundation, Second Harvest Food Bank, and United Way of Southeast Louisiana, helping address food insecurity, housing recovery, and support for people living with ALS. The team also honors military service members, first responders, and local heroes through special game-day recognitions and year-round initiatives. Overall, the Saints not only provide entertainment to fans through game day entertainment, but provide support and resources to numerous groups and organizations in and out of the community. Even according to Sam Shannon, working in the Saints facility is such a positive experience because he feels that everyone in the office is not only passionate about

what they do, but also passionate about ideals and issues that go beyond football. To New Orleans, the Saints are not only a football team, but an essential part of their culture.

### **What is their role?**

Sam Shannon serves as the Corporate Communications Manager for the New Orleans Saints, focusing mainly on the business side of the organization. His main responsibilities include organizing and coordinating community events in partnership with the Saints' corporate sponsors. This involves everything from planning events, to ensuring that both the organization and its partners are presented positively to the public and media. For example, Shannon recently facilitated a major engagement between the Saints and the upper management team of Caesars, a key partner with the Saints. Shannon ensures that all external business communications align with the values of the organization and messaging strategy.

Shannon's role within his job also involves writing press releases and seeking out media coverage for various initiatives and announcements. He plays an important role in maintaining a good relationship with the media. For example, he assists Mrs. Gayle Benson, the owner of the Saints, by drafting public quotes and helps her to articulate her messages in ways that resonate with the public and uphold a positive brand image for the Saints.

Shannon stated that even though there are certain seasons throughout the year, the Saints are such a big organization and they have such a high level of activity, that the workload remains pretty consistent throughout the year. However this being said, he did mention that the two most demanding times of the year are during the NFL Draft and during training camp. During the draft the demand for press releases and media coordination increases significantly, while training camp calls for hosting multiple events involving the fans. For example, many times the team will host practices that are open for the public so fans can watch the team practice. His role involves a

diverse amount of responsibilities that help to maintain the Saints' reputation as a responsible and community-focused organization and franchise, while building and strengthening relationships with the media and the community.

**Give an overview of this specialization of the PR sector:**

Sports PR is a sector of public relations focused on managing the public image, media relations, and fan engagement efforts of athletic organizations, teams, and individual athletes. In the context of a professional NFL team like the New Orleans Saints, PR professionals play a critical role in promoting the team brand, facilitating communication between players, coaches and the media, and strengthening relationships with fans, sponsors, and the local community. This PR specialization often involves other skill sets such as issue and crisis management, marketing and branding, and community relations especially in the environment of professional sports. For the Saints and other NFL teams, PR efforts are not just about maintaining the image of the organization, but also about shaping its identity, building loyalty with fans, and managing relationships in real-time.

Sports PR can be one of the harder areas to get involved in within public relations because sports teams have such a high fan base, and so many people would love to work for and be near the athletes they already admire and know of. Working in sports PR takes a lot of effort and is much more than just being involved in sports. This is such a difficult sector to get involved in because so many people love sports and would dream of working for their favorite sports' teams. For instance, many young children aspire to be professional sports players, and many times when they realize their dreams are most likely to not become reality, working for those professional sports teams is the next best thing. Even in Sam Shannon's case, he was not even sure exactly what career path he wanted to take, but he knew that he wanted to work for

something that involved sports. Luckily, he was able to fulfill his goals through networking, experiences, and building connections.

### **How does the job of this individual align with the definition of PR?**

According to the PRSA, Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Sam Shannon's role as Corporate Communications Manager closely aligns with this definition. His work involves organizing events that reflect the values of the New Orleans community and the organization's corporate partners. He helps strengthen the organization's relationships with business partners and the overall community by creating opportunities for meaningful engagements and ensuring the Saints are consistently represented in a light that is positive and authentic. Shannon also plays a role in maintaining strong media relations by writing press releases and assisting in drafting public statements on behalf of the Saints. This demonstrates his support for the mission of the Saints and effort to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with the publics. This allows the Saints' publics, including the average fan, to feel a deeper connection with the team and helps ensure the organization is portrayed in a positive and appealing way. Because his work focuses on thoughtful communication strategies and connection with the community, his job aligns with the definition of PR through expressing the team's commitment to maintaining strong, mutually beneficial relationships with all its publics.

### **What are the special areas of focus or skills that might be needed for this sector?**

Sam Shannon emphasized that writing was a key skill in order to succeed in Public Relations for a professional sports team. He expressed how writing is an essential and important part of his day to day responsibilities, along with the ability to articulate ideas in a clear and effective manner.

In addition to writing, Shannon also stressed that being personable and connecting with others is another key skill in order to achieve success in this field. Shannon explained that even though writing is an important skill, he explained that he does deal with more face to face communication. He expressed how the type of writing that he deals with is very different from the types of writing he dealt with in school. For example, he stated that his job does not involve writing long essays like one would for a class, but rather putting certain words in a way that is effective and informative. One key example he shared is the PR team's responsibility for assisting Mrs. Gayle Benson, the Saints' owner, by drafting quotes and helping shape public statements. He mentioned how this work requires a deep understanding of her tone, messaging goals, and how best to communicate her ideas to the public. Understanding the audience is a key factor because the PR team needs to put things in a way that will appeal to their publics.

Also, one should have a deep knowledge of sports, teams, and athletes in order to perform their job to the best of their ability. Without a strong familiarity within the sports world, it would be extremely difficult to effectively manage media relations, understand event contexts, and meet the communication needs of the organization. Understanding the audience, and the average sports fan, is essential, as the PR team must craft messages and ideas that resonate with and appeal to the sports teams' various publics.

### **How does this individual's work differ from your expectations of PR?**

Before speaking with Sam Shannon, I expected working in public relations for an NFL team to focus mainly on handling media interviews, issuing press releases about player performances, and managing crisis communication during the season. I assumed that his role would be almost entirely centered around football-related news and promoting the athletes. However, I was very surprised when I found out that Shannon's role is much more focused on

the business and community sides of the organization. Before this interview, I did not realize how important everything on the business side of things was to the team. His work involves building strong relationships with corporate partners, organizing community engagement events, and helping shape the organization's overall messaging to the public, and not just managing news related to games or players. Overall, what surprised me most was how closely public relations in the sports industry is connected to business development and community relations. I was expecting his job to focus a lot more on actual football and football media involving players and coaches, rather than the organization's involvement with other businesses and facilitating events.

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