

Crisis Communications Plan: Michael Phelps - 2009 Cannabis Incident

Group 7

Background

August 2008

Phelps, then 23 years old, wins a record setting 8 gold medals at the Beijing Olympics.

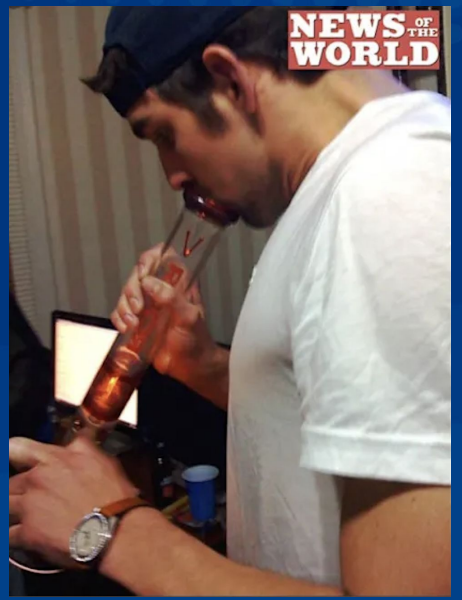


November 2008

Michael attended a party back at the University of South Carolina with friends.

January 2009

The News of the World, a British tabloid releases photo of Phelps smoking marijuana out of a bong at the November party.



This story gets picked up by ESPN and CNN (before the days of mainstream social media such as Instagram and the 24 hour news cycles were the main source of information for many people).

Background - Continued

February 2009

Since this occurred in a state where cannabis was illegal, news outlets (like cable news and major newspapers) picked up the story and questioned whether drug charges could follow. (No physical evidence beyond the photo)

The media would then bring up Phelps' DUI back in 2004, trying to paint a picture indicating that this is a pattern of reckless behavior and tarnishing his self branding of being a role model.

Hints of less aggressive enforcement from the Obama administration fueled debate over cannabis use, which still carried significant social stigma.

Public Apology

Phelps releases an official statement admitting the behavior and apologizing.

He said the behavior was "regrettable" and called it "bad judgment".





PR Response & Sponsorship Impact

Pros

- Michael Phelps issued a public apology quickly.
- Took accountability instead of denying the incident.
- Some sponsors like Speedo and Visa continued supporting him.
- PR response helped prevent long-term reputation damage.
- Continued Olympic success helped rebuild public trust.

Cons

- Kellogg's ended its endorsement deal with Phelps.
- Sponsors questioned alignment with family-friendly brand values.
- Negative media coverage damaged his public image temporarily.
- Controversy created concerns about athlete behavior and role-model expectations.
- Risk of losing fan trust and future sponsorship opportunities.

Athlete Analysis - Self

- Michael felt a sense of betrayal and violation of privacy from people he considered friends at this party.
- He experienced deep guilt explaining the situation to his mom and family.
- Michael was aware enough to know not to make the same mistakes twice and truly learn from them.
- It wasn’t until years later that he realized there was a larger issue he was trying to suppress.





From Reactive Apology → Proactive Advocate

Reframe with **Educational** Angle

- Target Audience: Youth Athletes & Olympic Fans
- Core Message: Accountability + Growth
- Rebuild Brand through Media + Social Media





Timeline of PR Strategy

Stage 1
First 24 Hours

Acknowledgement + Apology

Stage 2
First 2 Weeks

Exclusive, Controlled Interview with Large Broadcast

Stage 3
Mid Term

Partnerships with Youth & Mental Health Organizations

Stage 4
Long Term

Consistent Advocacy for Athletes & Mental Health through Social Media









Long-Term Effects

- Early awareness of mental health (ahead of its time)
- Sets precedent for future athlete PR strategies
- Comparable cases:

  Sha'Carri Richardson & Simone Biles

Michael Phelps today….

On podcasts (often clipped on TikTok), artists like Wiz Khalifa has share stories about smoking with Michael Phelps where Wiz Khalifa jokes that Phelps has “Aquaman’s lungs”.

Member of Cypress Hill, B-real also mentioned that Phelps can “keep up with the rest of them” and referring to his elite swimmer lung capacity.

