A Case Study of the Public Relations Strategies and Tactics Used

in the Relocation of the Rams and Chargers

by

Chris Ilenstine

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Broxon Sears, M.F.A.
Department of Strategic Communication

Amiso George, Ph.D.
Department of Strategic Communication
ABSTRACT

The National Football League (NFL henceforth) has a long and rich history of teams that have existed, still exist, and can’t trace their history before 2000. There have been many reasons for NFL teams to move, cease to exist or begin their journey as a franchise. Today, the league is strong with 32 teams across the United States. However, since the turn of the century, the league’s teams have remained stable. Until 2016.

That was the year the Rams decided to bring professional football back to Los Angeles (LA henceforth). The following season, the San Diego Chargers, also decided to test the market in LA. The following thesis will discuss the history of both teams, some important franchise moves in NFL history, an analysis of the sports market in LA, the pros and cons of both teams’ moves, what the Rams did to make their relocation a success, what the Chargers can do to improve their situation and finally the successful processes involved in a relocation. Additionally, the thesis illustrates how the Rams conducted their relocation more successfully and provides guidelines for what a franchise should do if considering relocation.
A History of the LA Rams

1930s: The Rams franchise began on February 13, 1937 when a group of Cleveland businessmen were granted a new franchise. The original uniforms were charcoal grey and red and in their inaugural season they finished 1-10. In their third season in 1939, they finally achieved a .500 record and more importantly for the brand as a franchise, the rookie running back Parker Hall won the award for NFL MVP.

1940s: After three seasons in Municipal Stadium they switched to their second stadium. (Sulecki, 2017) 1943 was a suspended season for the Rams due to war shortages. The next year the Rams bounced back from a few unsuccessful seasons and a cancelled season. They traded for a new QB, had a 9-1 record, won their division title and beat the Washington Redskins 15-14 to win their first NFL Championship. Bob Waterfield became the first player to receive a unanimous vote for NFL MVP. In 1946, the Rams experienced their first move to Los Angeles. They also signed two African-American players and they became some of the first African-American players in the NFL. Two years later, the Rams made an important branding move in NFL history. They became the first team to put a logo or symbol on helmets when they painted ram horns on the helmets. This creative endeavor was designed by one of the players. In game six of the 1949 season, the Rams set an NFL regular season record crowd of 86,080 on their way to a division title and losing in the NFL title game.

1950s: The Rams soon became the only team in LA after the NFL absorbed the All-America Football Conference and the LA Dons ceased to exist. After only 5 years in LA, the Rams won their first championship. In 1953, the Rams set another attendance pro football record
of 93,751. A milestone for the Rams occurred in 1957 when the Rams set a professional record with attendance of 102,368 against the San Francisco 49ers which stood until the Cowboys opened their new stadium in 2009.

**1960s:** After tough years of little success, the Rams lowered capacity in the remodeled Coliseum from over 100,000 to 72,000. In 1966, there was the merger of the AFL and the NFL and the team had their best record in eight years. With this, there was a uniform change and they decided on a blue helmet with white horns and blue and white uniforms.

**1970s:** Only eight years later they went back to the blue and gold uniforms. In 1977, Rams create a new Coliseum configuration reducing capacity from 91,038 to 71,039. However, in 1978, they announced a move to Anaheim stadium beginning in 1980 to sell out a smaller stadium. The last year before beginning play in Anaheim, 1979, new ownership moved club offices and in-season training facility to an elementary school in Anaheim. That year they sold out the first seven regular season games.

**1980s:** In 1984, the Rams hosted their first playoff game at Anaheim stadium and had a record crowd of 67,037 as Eric Dickerson broke the NFL rushing record with 2,105 yards.

**1990s:** The year 1995 brought perhaps one of the biggest changes to the Rams organization in their history. They were authorized a move to St. Louis where football was not a strong market.

**2000s:** Only five years after moving to their new home, the Rams soon became the “Greatest Show on Turf”, their nickname during their success, and won a thrilling Super Bowl against the Tennessee Titans in 2000. The year after they went 14-2, their best record in club history, and changed to a blue and gold uniform instead of the blue and yellow. In 2002, they
returned to the Super Bowl but unfortunately lost. After over a decade of mediocrity and lack of playoff appearances, the Rams returned home to LA starting in the 2016 season.

*(LA Rams Chronology, 2017)*

**A History of the LA Chargers**

**1950s:** The Los Angeles Chargers (Chargers henceforth) are a much younger team than the LA Rams. In 1959, there was a meeting to create a new football league with six representatives including an LA entry. A second meeting initialized the idea of the “American Football League.” Frank Leahy was named general manager of the Los Angeles team and Barron Hilton became the owner of the new franchise.

**1960s:** In 1960, the Chargers took the former coach of the LA Rams, Sid Gilman, on a three-year contract. The Chargers decided on blue and gold uniforms with lightning bolts on the helmets and pants which were unveiled at a cocktail party. The same year, AFL teams signed a five-year contract with ABC which brought visibility to the new league. The Chargers had a much lower attendance than the already-established LA Rams. Their first preseason game had 27,778 fans, their first regular season game had 17,724 and their AFL Western Division title clinching game had 9,928. The owner, Barron Hilton, visited San Diego soon after as a possible moving place for Chargers. In 1961, The Greater San Diego Sports Association was formed after Hilton’s visit to attract major league teams and Hilton was given approval from the AFL to move the Chargers from Los Angeles to San Diego. The Chargers new home, Balboa Stadium, was expanded from 23,000 to 34,000. The Chargers played in their first AFL Championship against Houston and lose 10-3 in front of 29,556. In 1964, the Chargers won their first AFL
Championship when they beat Boston 51-10 with an attendance of 30,127 at Balboa Stadium. The AFL teams signed a five-year contract with NBC which started in 1965 for a record $36 million, and continued their prominence as an additional football league. The Chargers Thanksgiving game against Buffalo set a Balboa Stadium attendance record of 34,865. In 1965, the San Diego City Council endorsed construction of a new stadium in Mission Valley and it was later renamed Qualcomm Stadium. In November of that same year, the construction of the $27 million stadium was approved. The year 1966 changed the NFL forever. The AFL and the NFL announced plans to merge in the 1970 season and the Rams and the Chargers played three preseason games in San Diego Stadium (the Mission Valley stadium) in 1967. Soon after, the Chargers began to experience steady attendance growth and prestige. In 1967, San Diego Stadium opened the season with 45,998 for the Chargers first game against an NFL team. They got their first win against an NFL team in 1968 against the San Francisco 49ers and the next year they had another record crowd of 54,042 as they played the New York Jets.

**1970s:** The years to come had a lot of change and expansion for the San Diego Chargers. In 1972, in a period of 221 days, GM Harland Svare conducted an NFL record 21 trades. Seven years later, the Chargers got their first playoff berth in 14 years. It was their first division title since 1965 and they got a national Monday Night Football audience against the Denver Broncos.

**1980s:** The Chargers decided to sign a 20-year lease with the city of San Diego in 1983 and this lease expanded the seats to 60,100. San Diego was then awarded with hosting a Super Bowl in 1988. San Diego was again awarded a Super Bowl for the 1998 season and a sculpture was created of Barron Hilton for founding the AFL and bringing the Chargers to San Diego.

**1990s:** In 1995, the Chargers advanced to the AFC Championship game with a home record of 63,381. Chargers president Dean Spanos and City of San Diego announced an extended
lease through 2020 as well as modernizing and expanding the stadium to more than 70,000 fans. The new updated and expanded Qualcomm Stadium surpassed home attendance records four times during the 1997 season.

2000s: The next two years the attendance record was broken twice. In 2003, the Chargers hosted the Super Bowl for a third time and also activated part of their lease that allowed them to begin plans for a new stadium. A new lease agreement allowed the city to vote on a new football-only stadium in 2006. In 2006, the San Diego city council amended the lease for the Chargers to look for stadium options within San Diego county and there was a new home attendance record of 68,810 during the playoff game against New England. In a surprising turn of events and no resolution on a new stadium, the Chargers decided to leave San Diego for Los Angeles starting in the 2017 season and are currently playing in StubHub Center in Carson, CA.

(Chronology 1959-present, 2017)

Important Moves in NFL History

There have been a few moves in NFL history that are important to note. While many moves occurred involving teams that no longer exist, I found it interesting and important to cite a few moves involving well-known teams for context’s sake.

In 1982, the Oakland Raiders moved to Los Angeles. This was an important move because it showed that the city of LA can sustain two NFL teams. However, the two-team dynamic only lasted for 13 years so it remains to be seen whether or not two teams can be sustained for the long-term (NFL franchise moves and mergers, 2017).
In 1996, the original Cleveland Browns moved to Baltimore and were renamed the Baltimore Ravens. Three years later, Cleveland was awarded another franchise and decided to use their original name the Browns. It has been noted that this move was like the Rams’ move to Los Angeles in 2016. The original Browns had trouble finding a stadium to fit their needs. They used a few different stadiums over the course of a season and could never fill them. Their owner at the time, Art Modell, found it more profitable and viable for the long-term success of the team to move to Baltimore (NFL franchise moves and mergers, 2017).

The Houston Oilers originally moved to Memphis as the Tennessee Oilers in 1997. They played at the Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium for one season. They couldn’t establish a market or fan base, so they moved to Nashville in 1997 and played at Vanderbilt stadium. In 1999, they changed their name from the Tennessee Oilers to the Tennessee Titans in 1999. In 2002, Houston was granted another franchise and became the Houston Texans (NFL franchise moves and mergers, 2017).

The Oakland Raiders last season were granted a move to Las Vegas. This move is proposed to occur for the 2020 season. Currently, they are working on sponsors and have initial plans for a stadium close to the Las Vegas strip. Their future success is still unclear as Las Vegas recently got its first professional sports team and the Oakland Raiders will be only the second professional team in Las Vegas (NFL franchise moves and mergers, 2017).
Analysis of Sports Industry in LA

Sports are a big part of the greater Los Angeles area and the Los Angeles metro area is home to 11 professional sports franchises: Rams, Chargers, Lakers, Clippers, Spark, Dodgers, Angels, Kings, Anaheim Ducks, Galaxy and LA Football Club. This shows that there is no lack of franchises to support and also that LA has the population and fan base to support many sports teams. A recent study in 2009 showed around 18.5 million people attending LA sporting events and generating $4.1 billion (Howard 2013). Additionally, the sports industry in LA employed around 4,000 people in 2010 (Howard 2013). So why does it seem that the city of Los Angeles is not ready or not enthusiastic for two football teams? What made the owners of the Rams and Chargers think LA was the right location when LA had survived without a football team for 20 years?

The city of Los Angeles is a complicated sports city with an intriguing fan base. The city is known for its fame and discerning fans and the fan base takes on the personality of the movie industry lifestyle of Los Angeles. In his description of LA sports fans, LA Times writer Bill Plaschke said, “They’re simply refined shoppers who want quality entertainment for their sports fandom dollar. If the teams start performing like winners, the fans will come.” Essentially, LA fans are discerning with what they choose to attend, and they want a quality product. That at first seems like not too much to ask considering they pay a lot of money and travel to attend games.

However, that seems somewhat wrong in the sports world. Fans across the country and of every sport in the world rejoice in their team’s successes and stay with the teams when they lose. Analyze other fan bases such as the Cleveland Browns, the Oakland Raiders and the Detroit Lions for example. Those fans stuck with their teams even when they were horrible because these teams have history, traditions, and hold certain places in people’s hearts. Sports connect
with people on many levels and frequently teams that aren’t doing well still try to give the fans the best experience. Some teams create strategies where fans leave games not knowing or not caring if their team has won or lost.

**Pros and Cons of LA Rams Move**

While the LA Rams had a home in St. Louis, they were never a huge part of the sports tradition in the city and they were always the third team behind the Cardinals and the Blues. They left a mostly apathetic sports city in search of a new home and this should be considered a smart decision. St. Louis is considered by many sources to be one of the greatest baseball towns in America, but was it ever really suited for the NFL? St. Louis made no efforts to improve the situation of football within the city. It made events for baseball an incredible experience at Busch Stadium. Additionally, St. Louis has made efforts to grow its brand as a hockey town with a campaign called “Hockey STL 2020” where they want to grow the game in the region by 70 percent. Through this program they want to develop 5,000 new players and commit $2 million to youth programs (Hochman 2017). Between these efforts to grow hockey and a commitment to baseball excellence, a football team was a losing cause.

A theory for why St. Louis is an apathetic sports city is that the fan base was split in half as a result of the performance of the Rams. There were the original fans who were with the team when it moved to St. Louis in 1995 and remember the Rams as the “Greatest Show on Turf” when they won a Super Bowl and returned to the Super Bowl two years later. These were the fans who felt anger and resentment when the Rams left. However, a large portion of the fan base only remembers the Rams from the mid-to-late 2000s and the 2010s. These fans had no gripe
with the team leaving. Nowadays, mostly all evidence of them ever being there has been scrubbed from the city (Mays 2017).

A second advantage of the Rams move to Los Angeles was the fact that they were able to secure a great stadium as their temporary stadium until the new facility is finished in 2020. The Rams have been able to use the famed and historic LA Coliseum which is a landmark to the city. It is home to the beloved USC Trojans, has hosted Olympics, and can seat close to 100,000 fans. Additionally, the Coliseum is located right in the heart of Los Angeles. This was the best possible outcome for the Rams until their stadium is completed. The stadium has high-visibility and a seating capacity that allows the Rams to grow their brand in LA.

The Rams tried another tactic in an effort to connect with their new fan base. During their time in LA they had both blue and yellow uniforms and also blue and white uniforms for a period of time. In their first season back in 2016, they had several games where they wore throwback blue and yellow uniforms which connects them with their audience that can recall the original Rams. Additionally, to show that they are a new team with a new home, the Rams changed their logo to a white-horned ram and their helmets and pants permanently had white horns/stripes. This was a strategic rebranding effort to refresh their image in both Los Angeles and across the NFL.
There is one disadvantage with the move and it’s more a result of how the team has performed.

Given that the new home has a stricter and more discerning audience, their attendance has plummeted between the 2016 and 2017 season. According to espn.com which shows attendance figures for every season, the LA Rams averaged 74,121 fans per game during the 2016 season. While this is only 89.8% of the Coliseum and one of the lowest attendance percentages in the NFL, it was still a drastic improvement from St. Louis. However, so far this year, the Rams attendance has stayed in the 50,000s range which is on track for the lowest attendance drop over two seasons in NFL history. Many comments on Twitter showed how attendance for USC vs. Texas was close to 90,000 which was higher than the Rams and Chargers combined*. It remains to be seen how the Rams attendance figures will continue. The Rams are currently 8-4 and in first place in their division. According to the *Sports Industry Analysis of LA* section of this paper, this should be a good sign for more fans to attend LA Rams football games.

*Graphic included in appendix*
Pros and Cons of LA Chargers Move

Perhaps the biggest downfall of the Chargers move is their temporary stadium until the Inglewood stadium opens in 2020. While the Rams were able to secure a large and visible stadium to gain traction in a new market, the Chargers were only able to secure the StubHub Center in Carson, CA. This is a nice facility and provides fans with a good gameday experience, but it is simply not suitable for an NFL team. It has a maximum capacity of 30,000 and even the lowest attendance figure outside of the LA teams (Cincinnati Bengals) still draw an average attendance of 53,521. Entering a new market, a team needs to be visible and easily accessible for its fans. Carson, CA is closer to the Long Beach area than Los Angeles and attendance has ranged from 25,000-27,000 due to low capacity. With such low figures, the Chargers do not have a chance to gain new fans and raise awareness of their brand in a new market.

The San Diego Chargers had a brief and unimportant history in Los Angeles. They were founded in 1959 and by 1961 were granted a move to San Diego. They have a long and reputable
history in San Diego. Their owners have been involved in the community from housing natural
disaster victims to providing funds for kids’ sports programs to donating to firefighters and other
public servants. What the NFL and owner of the Chargers didn’t seem to understand was that the
Chargers were dearly loved in San Diego. San Diego, despite being the 8th largest city in
America, had only two major league teams and one was taken away. The Chargers had been in
San Diego for 55 years and had built a history and connection with the community. This
community begged and pleaded for the Chargers to stay and to find an option for a new stadium.
The Chargers did not know their audience when they decided to move. There had been relatively
no Chargers fans north of Orange County, and the franchise was moved into a completely new,
indifferent market.

Finally, a positive outcome of the move is also the stadium. While the stadium is low-capacity, it is very nice and relatively new. The franchise is trying to attract new fans with a
special kind of gameday experience similar to soccer games. StubHub Center is unique in that it
has club level seating which is practically on the grass.
Why LA Rams Move was More Successful

There are three big factors in deciding that the Rams move was more successful than the Chargers. The first is that the Rams had a storied history in Los Angeles playing from 1946-1995. During that span of time, they won some championships, had many all-star players and coaches, and posted massive attendance numbers. They even posted the NFL attendance record which stood until 2009.

A second factor comes from the analysis of sports fans in Los Angeles. If we take what L.A. Times writer Bill Plaschke says about the fan base, consider the two teams successes and which is currently faring better in LA, then the Rams, especially this season, are much improved and are better than the Chargers. They are a better, more marketable and attractive product in the eyes of the LA market. The Rams, being 8-4 and in the larger Coliseum with a bigger fan base, have been more successful thus far in their move.

A third, and final factor, on why the Rams have been more successful is their temporary stadium choice. As stated earlier, the stadium choice was more than just a stadium. It is a chance to raise awareness and brand in the new market. The Rams, although their fan attendance
numbers have been dropping, have had more opportunity from the beginning with a stadium that holds close to 100,000. The Chargers meanwhile always had a ceiling because their stadium couldn’t exceed 30,000 and this limited their exposure to the new fan base.

**What the Chargers Can Do to Improve Their Situation in LA**

Some pundits such as FOX sports commentator Colin Cowherd are raving for the NFL to send the Chargers back to San Diego. If the Chargers are to stay in Los Angeles I have devised some strategies for them to make the best of their situation:

**Proposed Strategies for the Chargers**

The first strategy comes from the Atlanta Falcons. After their 2016 season, they began construction on a new stadium. However, they made sure everyone else knew about how grand and advanced this stadium would be. Every few months, the NFL Facebook account would show time lapse videos of the outside of the stadium and praise how beautiful it was. The NFL account
also did an interview segment with Matt Ryan, the quarterback of the Falcons, as he walked through the almost-complete stadium. I believe this could be a useful strategy for the LA Chargers as the completion of the Inglewood stadium comes closer. After a slow start in their inaugural season in a new home, their best strategy could be to implement a PR strategy that promotes a new stadium. If they shift the focus from their team to a beautiful new stadium with amenities that are sure to attract any LA fan, it could bring excitement back to their organization.

The second strategy would be to get involved within the community and build relationships with the locals. This could include donating to local charities, visiting local hospitals and food banks, hosting open practices where players interact with fans, and hosting football camps for kids. The public loves to see teams and famous individuals interact with audiences such as children or individuals with illnesses. Football camps or promotions within the community are often high-visibility. They receive segments on ESPN or shots during night primetime games showing what players have been doing within their city. This would not only raise awareness of the Chargers but also raise the perception of the team.

Finally, a suggestion to continue doing what happened minimally during the 2017 offseason. The Chargers could combine some of their practices with the Rams in an effort to show unity for LA and to have visibility with the more successful LA team.
Final Thoughts on Keys to a Successful Sports Relocation

One of the biggest takeaways from my research of the relocations of the Chargers and the Rams is that the franchise must know the audience and have a firm grasp of the sports market. The Chargers moved without analyzing their audience and realizing that there were not many Chargers fans to begin with in Los Angeles. They should have also taken into account that there was no previous history or allegiance to the Chargers.

Additionally, there seemed to be no research done into the sports industry of Los Angeles as it stood before the move. Los Angeles had survived without a football for 21 years and nobody thought anything of it other than suggestions of a football team from time to time. The brief periods of history where there were two teams were infrequent. The Raiders and the Rams were together in LA for only 13 years before they both vacated in 1995. This should have been some indication of how football teams or at the very least two teams at once have fared.

My second key to a successful sports relocation would be to have stadium plans and a way to gain traction with fans. A team is reliant on its temporary home and also having a viable plan for a new stadium. As stated earlier, the temporary stadium is actually very important. It is the first time the team is visible in its new home. A team needs a large stadium to grow its fan base and one that is centrally located and easily accessible.

A team must have some sort of familiarity or history with your new location. Additionally, going to a place where one has a history, rebranding is important with a logo or uniforms. The familiarity is especially important in the topic of the Rams and Chargers. The Rams had a long history in Los Angeles where they continuously exceeded attendance numbers, won championships, and created Hall of Fame stars. This means, while they left for 21 years,
fans of football remained cognizant of the Rams’ past. Although Los Angeles survived without missing a beat, the Rams’ past made it easy to reintroduce the franchise into that sports market.

The Rams used this familiarity in a deliberate way when redesigning their logo and their use of throwback uniforms. During some of their games in the 2016 and 2017 seasons in LA the Rams wore their blue and yellow uniforms which are the same as the uniforms they wore when they went to back-to-back Super Bowls. They also established themselves as a different team by redesigning their logo with white horns, as well as white horns on their helmet and white stripes on the pants.

Finally, it is important to have community outreach and engagement. The Chargers need to use this approach to be successful in LA. A successful franchise is almost always present within a community. It helps with natural disaster relief and they host camps for kids with exposure for the athletes. Not only is it a positive impact in the community, but it is good public relations. If the people in the community see all the good being done and have a positive perception of your franchise, it will make them more willing to try your product (in this case a football game).

The future of the Rams and Chargers remains unclear. The Rams are more successful now, but the Chargers may have a resurgence as an NFL franchise. But it’s clear that they are not the last teams to move in the National Football League. Through my research, I concluded that the Rams used a certain strategy to reestablish themselves in the LA market. Additionally, I developed four steps that are essential to a team’s relocation.
Appendix

Graphic 1
References


