

**Public Relations Industry Paper:**  
**NFL Communications Director Tim Schlittner**

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“Football brings people together. It’s a uniting force.” While a career in public relations may pull professionals in vastly different directions, there is one requirement for all areas: passion and a belief in the mission. For NFL Director of Communications Tim Schlittner, his passions have taken him through a career in government/politics and eventually led to sports public relations within the NFL.

Tim Schlittner started, like most of us, with big dreams of attending Syracuse. Growing up in Triton Falls, New Jersey, Schlittner became a die-hard Knicks fan at a young age. He would attentively listen to the games announced by Marv Albert, the voice of the Knicks. After discovering that Albert was a Syracuse alumni, Schlittner’s sights were set on following in Albert’s footsteps. While Schlittner applied to other schools at his mother's request, he knew that if given the opportunity, Syracuse would be where he began his future. However, life is never without its roadblocks. Schlittner was not accepted into the Newhouse School right away, but was told he would have to keep a high GPA and pass the grammar test to transfer internally into Newhouse. Fueled by his determination to pursue his passion in sports broadcast journalism, Schlittner was able to transfer into Newhouse in his sophomore year, officially beginning his career as a communications professional.

During Tim Schlittner’s time at Syracuse, the world was becoming one of severe political turmoil. Schlittner recalls the 2000 election, one of the closest and most heated elections of recent years, sparking his interest in politics. Then, less than a year later, 9/11 occurred. Tragically, Schlittner lost his uncle, a firefighter, in the terrorist attack. After the loss, Schlittner began to think about what a career in public service and government could be like. Schlittner had political science as a double major alongside his broadcast degree and was able to intern on Capitol Hill during an undergrad summer. Schlittner recalls that as graduation was looming near, he internally struggled with the decision of trying to break into the TV/News industry or follow the pull he felt to politics and Washington, D.C.

Deciding to follow the tug towards D.C., Schlittner moved to Washington in 2003 and secured his first job in March of 2004, working for Congresswoman Jane Harman of California. Schlittner's outstanding writing ability allowed him to work his way up, working for various members of Congress before becoming a speechwriter and assistant communications director for the United Food and

Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW). Again, Schlittner's superb ability to dissect information and convey complicated issues in an easily digestible written manner allowed him to work for AFL-CIO in various roles over the span of nearly 7 years. It was with the AFL-CIO, Schlittner met challenges and mentors that would change his career path forever.

In August of 2021, Richard Trumka, President of AFL-CIO and close friend and mentor to Tim Schlittner, unexpectedly passed away (Richard Trumka, 2021). At the time, Schlittner was the communications director for the company and in that role was responsible for handling the communication responsibilities that came with the death of a public figure. Schlittner talked about how everyone in the company was grieving a personal loss, but as a company, they had a responsibility and a job to do. I was extremely struck by this part of our conversation. When I picture my future, I often just associate my job/career with professional success, however, I feel that many people, myself included, forget that your coworkers can become some of the most important people in your life. They aren't just a professional asset but people you build emotional and personal relationships with. Schlittner's experience is a testament to the balance you need to develop as a public relations professional. Unexpected events will happen, including ones that take an emotional toll on the personal side, but you have to remember that there is a job that needs to be done. There is a responsibility to the organization to handle everything and keep the company on the right course, no matter how hard it may be to separate personal and professional emotions.

As an unexpected death often does, Schlittner's contentment with his current position began to diminish. Schlittner felt like he was now at a point where he didn't feel the same passion and joy with his career anymore, saying, "I knew something had to change." Determined to make a switch, Schlittner turned to his oldest and truest love, sports. As fate would have it, shortly after Schlittner decided a change in the sports direction was needed, he learned that there was an opening for Director of Communications for the NFL. After a lengthy interview process, Schlittner landed on top, starting the position on May 9th of 2022.

The National Football League, or NFL, was founded in 1920 in Canton, Ohio. While the league started with just five teams, now in 2025, the league has expanded to 32 teams with 53 active players on each team. The teams are divided into two conferences, the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC). Within the two conferences, the 16 teams are divided into 4 different divisions: North, East, South, and West (Oriard, 2025). While the league started small, the football world and the NFL have developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry. The NFL strives to give football players an audience and platform to continue to showcase their athletic talents in a professional setting (Oriard, 2025). Schlittner spoke about how incredible it has been to see the changes and development of the NFL even over the course of the past few years. The draft has gone from being held in a small ballroom in New York City to attracting thousands of people and rotating through NFL cities, becoming a major fan event. With growing global attention, having a well-oiled communications department is a necessity for success. The NFL Communications department is made up of about 30 people who oversee the NFL's media, international expansion, community relations, social responsibility, and DEI (Bradley, 2024).

With such a large company that can have a gigantic effect on the public comes major weight and responsibilities within the communication department. While Schlittner has always been a fan of the game, he told me that "being a fan is not enough to work at the NFL." Like within any company, you have to bring something that is of value and helps better the organization; if not, simply put, you are a waste of time and resources. No matter what industry you are working in, you're human capital and skill set must be specialized in a way to help you better wherever you work, every day (Horn 2025).

The NFL umbrellas thousands of employees. Whether players, team faculty or staff, or NFL leadership, all of these employees are human and have the ability to make mistakes that reflect poorly on the NFL organizations as a whole. It's the responsibility of the communications department to carry out crisis communications and issue management to minimize any damage done. A part of beneficial issue management is preventing a crisis before it truly happens. To do this, prevention and planning need to be done every day, continuously evolving to the situation around (Horn, 2025). In the NFL, everything done

by the organization is done under a global microscope of opinions. Schlittner felt he was right for the job because he had the experience and skills of making decisions and working in a “fast-paced, highly scrutinized environment.”

I got a glimpse into the crazy and fascinating world of sports communications as Tim Schlittner walked me through his daily roles and responsibilities. Schlittner first starts with research. At the basis of all PR is research and learning (Horn 2025). How does your organization affect public sentiment? In what way can you change your message to cater to your target audience? To collect this invaluable data, Schlittner reviews all news sources from the morning and assesses how the NFL was covered and what the sentiment associated with the NFL seems to be. If less than desirable coverage arises, Schlittner reaches out to the reporter and works to make sure the story is right, providing a statement or asking for a correction. This seems to be the obvious side of public relations, making sure that if a reporter is spreading misinformation or disinformation, you personally are communicating with them and providing a solution or correction rather than reaming the reporter out for making a mistake. However, it was what Schlittner said next that I will tuck in my back pocket for my career. Schlittner says he will also call up reporters and writers from beneficial stories that day and simply tell them that “they did a good job and got the story right.” I feel that it is easy to concentrate on fixing the negative, but it is just as important, if not more important, to recognize the good work of reporters and continue to develop a positive relationship with them. A simple thank you and acknowledgement of their hard work go a long way in creating a lasting, mutually beneficial relationship.

It was through his continual research of the NFL media that Schlittner had the idea for the News Bureau. Within the communications department, there are so many departments dedicated to specific sectors of communications, but the NFL News Bureau works to be the overarching generalist in the department. They work to develop lasting relationships with media across all platforms. On top of that, the News Bureau members are the ones “who sit and work across from the board.” Throughout our conversation, it was clear that Schlittner prided himself on his written capabilities. Having strong written communication skills is one of, if not the most important, skills to have as a public relations professional.

It's impossible to have a verbal conversation with every single person within the target audience you are trying to reach. Therefore, you need a way to put out the message you are trying to put out in a way that will be clear in its purpose and interpretation to the majority of the audience that reads it (Horn, 2025). In Schlittner's case, by working with media to put out stories and information about the NFL, his incredible writing ability allows him to convey precisely what information he wants the media professionals to put out and how to phrase it. This enables the NFL to get the audience sentiment that it needs and wants.

The last question I asked Schlittner, for me, is the most important one, as an emerging public relations professional. I asked him why he wanted to work for the organization and if the organization's values and mission aligned with his own. I have always been a person with strong values and morals, and I want to wake up knowing that my work is having a direct positive impact on society as a whole. I felt my personality and interests were extremely similar to Schlittner's, so getting his opinion on how he felt in his current role was important to me.

Schlittner's response exceeded my expectations. He told me, "Football is a uniting force." It brings joy and distraction to the craziness and sorrows of the world. In terms of values, football itself is a sport of "teamwork, opportunity, competitiveness, and empathy," which are at the core of Schlittner's personal values. I went into PR to work for an organization that strives for an impact. Up until talking to Tim Schlittner, I felt like the biggest way to do that was within government relations or politics. Schlitter's perspective on the effect of the NFL and sports in general, and its ability to positively impact communities and families, has led me to acknowledge that there are multiple paths to do so. Personally, my younger brother is 14, peak teenage years, in which he is way too cool for his older sister. Though I am in another state, every single Seahawks game, without fail, he would text me throughout the game asking if I was watching or calling me to rant about our terrible O-line (which hopefully will be helped with the 2025 draft). We are completely different people, with different interests, living in different states, but no matter how far we are physically apart, I know we are both watching the same game, thinking the same things. This can happen because of the way professionals like Schlittner have the ability to create the image of the NFL in a way that connects to a broad audience, including young teenage boys to

college-aged girls. I realized I can have an impact no matter what organization I'm working for, as long as I conduct PR in a way that aligns with the values of a good-intentioned organization and brings awareness to the goals we are trying to reach.

However, like a business, money is always a factor. Schlittner's previous background revolved around companies that were more "labor-centric" and conserving their capital, while the NFL is about growing and investing its capital. Capitalism and the need for an organization to have money are never going to simply vanish. It will always be a part of society and, therefore, a part of public relations. Schlittner felt that the change was an adjustment, but not one that weighed heavily on him, as the NFL is looking to use and invest capital to better itself as an organization and generate more opportunities for all athletes.

According to the Public Relations textbook by Tom Kelleher, the definition of public relations is "Management of communication between an organization and its publics, or the strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their public" (Kelleher, 2021). While the definition of public relations and the day-to-day tasks vary from job to job, after speaking with Tim Schlittner, I feel as though his role as Director of Communications for the NFL embodies this definition. Schlitter works every day to be the middleman between the message the NFL needs to convey to the public and how that message gets put out and perceived. He works tirelessly to research public sentiment and how the media is presenting the NFL as an organization. Not only that, but Schlittner has learned how to continue to build and value his relationships with both the media and the public in a way that will continue to lead to a lasting mutually beneficial relationship, as the definition states. Now obviously, the definition doesn't encompass all the responsibilities Schlittner's career requires, but in terms of a general overview, I feel that the definition is the basis of Schlittner's job. One thing general public relations definitions don't include, but I feel (especially after talking to Tim Schlittner), is passion. Every day in public relations may look different. It's easy to make mistakes that unfortunately reflect on the whole organization, but it requires a certain passion and drive to continue to come back day after day, even when something goes wrong. Throughout our conversation, it was clear

that Schlittner has a passion for football and truly believes in the work of the NFL. This gives him the drive and motivation to show up to work every day excited for whatever may be at hand.

Schlittner's work within the NFL is close to what I expected public relations to look like for such a big and impactful organization. Having an organization that relies so heavily on the public and their opinion, it makes sense that the majority of his work involves making sure the media is generating a narrative that will attract the public. I was surprised to learn just how many sectors there are even within the communications department. I feel that it goes to show how crucial a public relations team is to any organization. Covering all aspects of the organization, whether it be the media, DEI, or managing content for socials, public relations is embedded into every aspect of the NFL and is needed for it to continue to thrive and maintain a positive relationship with the public.

Public relations is a field that thrives on rapid change and unpredictability, and the ability to adapt isn't just a professional skill but a personal one. Tim Schlittner faced unpredictable challenges throughout his career, yet every time a roadblock appeared, he was able to use his emotional intelligence, intuition, skill set, and strategic thinking to dictate what decisions he needed to make in his career path and balance his personal life. Just as life is unpredictable and dynamic, public relations possesses the same traits. To thrive in the field, you must be able to pivot and adapt to whatever personal or professional challenges come your way (Horn, 2025).

One of my biggest takeaways from my interview with Schlittner was that it's more than okay to have an interest and passion in multiple sectors of public relations. Schlittner thought government and politics were where he wanted to be, only to realize after many years that he needed a change. I felt as though I needed to make a choice about which sector of public relations I wanted to work in now. After speaking with Schlittner, I realized I need to follow my passion wherever that may be. My passion might completely change in 6 months, 4 years, or 30 years, but the beauty of public relations is that every single organization across so many different sectors needs public relations.

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