How Tom Brady won fans by dodging 'Deflategate' questions

July 11 2016, by Jeff Grabmeier

Tom Brady. Credit: Photo by Keith Allison.

Sometimes, saying "I don't know" may be the best way for sports stars and other celebrities to gain favor with the public when faced with tough questions.

That's the key result from a new case study involving Tom Brady, star quarterback for the New England Patriots, and a news conference he gave concerning the Deflategate scandal.

People actually felt more goodwill from Brady and thought he dodged questions less when he started his answers with "I don't know" or "I have no idea," the study found.

"I was shocked. People thought Brady was providing better answers when he basically dodged the questions by saying he didn't know," said David Clementson, author of the study and doctoral student in communication at The Ohio State University.

The study appears in the current issue of the *International Journal of Sport Communication*.

Deflategate is the name given to a controversy about whether the Patriots used deliberately underinflated footballs to gain an advantage over the Indianapolis Colts in an NFL playoff game in January 2015.

On January 22, Brady held a news conference to respond to the charges. His propensity to say "I don't know" and "I have no idea" to many of the questions was mocked by comedy shows including Saturday Night Live and Jimmy Kimmel Live and even by the White House press secretary.

Clementson said he thought the news conference would serve as an interesting case study of what happens to sports stars who equivocate and avoid direct answers when presented with tough questions.

"I was expecting that when Brady said 'I don't know,' that people would be unsatisfied with the response and want answers even more, but that's not what I found," he said.

The setup of the study was simple. With the aid of a professional videographer, Clementson created two shortened versions of the news conference. One version included a selection of unaltered questions and answers in which Brady provided statements such as "I don't know" followed by further explanation. The second video was the same, but with the "I don't know" and similar equivocations removed.

Participants (105 college students) watched one of the two versions during the two-week period in 2015 between the Super Bowl (which the Patriots won) and the issuance of an NFL report on the Deflategate scandal.

Participants who watched the edited version thought that Brady dodged more questions than those who watched the version where he constantly answered "I don't know."

Not only that, but participants who watched the real version of the news conference reported feeling more goodwill from Brady than did those who watched the edited video. They also were more satisfied with his responses.

There were no differences in how people who saw either version rated Brady's trustworthiness and competence.

While the findings may initially seem surprising, Clementson said they also make intuitive sense.

"In the real world, we generally believe people when they say 'I don't know' to a question we ask them. We don't hold that against people. Why would it be different for sports stars and politicians?" he said.

"People felt better about Brady when he admitted he didn't know before he offered further comments."

The results also fit with the widely accepted "Equivocation Theory," Clementson said. This theory states that when a speaker is asked a tricky question in which a direct answer would offend a big portion of the audience, it is best to give vague answers.

"Most people say they want straight answers from their politicians and sports stars, but in many cases, they really don't," Clementson said.

"They really only want straight answers when they agree with them. This study fits right in with that theory."

More information: David E. Clementson, Dodging DeflateGate: A Case Study of Equivocation and Strategic Ambiguity in a Crisis, *International Journal of Sport Communication* (2016). DOI: 10.1123/IJSC.2015-0003

Provided by The Ohio State University