



## WHAT TO DO IN A MEDIA CRISIS HELPSHEET

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### WHAT TO DO IN A MEDIA CRISIS

Accidents happen and so do muck-ups, failures, gaffes, bungles, political controversies and many other embarrassments.

When the news breaks, you may find your group in the middle of a media flurry. What you want to avoid at all costs is this flurry turning into a full-blown media crisis that can cause long-term damage to your group and a loss of public confidence.

Whatever it is that has happened to your group – be it accident, muck-up, controversy or legal action – the first priority for your group is to fix it and to ensure there is no continuing danger or risk to the public or any chance of the same thing happening again. And you also need to deal with the media.

#### Prepare for the crisis

As well as preparing a risk management strategy it is a good idea for community groups to set up a "Crisis Communications Plan". This will ensure that senior staff and volunteers, directors and Board members know exactly what should happen should your group be faced with a media crisis.

This plan will ensure that your group has:

- An appointed spokesperson/s.
- A process where everyone in the organisation knows who to call should a major incident or media crisis develop.
- An established process where senior staff or executives can gather as much accurate information as quickly as possible.
- A process whereby accurate information can be provided to the media as soon as practicable.

So what happens when the media comes calling about something that has gone wrong and it involves your group?

#### **DON'T RUN. DON'T HIDE.**

The first reaction – and the worst – for most groups is to try to ignore the attention and hope the story will go away. Resist the temptation to circle the wagons or stick your head in the sand. It doesn't go away and as long as what's on display is your organisation's failings, you're risking the ongoing haemorrhaging of support for your group.

The reality is that your group will end up having to address the issue publicly. The longer it takes, the longer the media and the public believe you have something to hide.

The other reality is that the media will run a story. What you want as much as possible is to influence the nature of that story and ensure that what is run is accurate and fair. It is a bit rich to complain about not having your side of the story aired when you have refused to provide it.

The other theme that you want to stand out is that the incident is not acceptable and not normal and that your group is doing everything in its power to ensure that it's not repeated. Organisations that come out of a media crisis with their reputations intact are those that deal with the issue quickly, effectively, honestly – and just as importantly, are perceived to be doing exactly that.

So how does a small non-profit organisation with no money for public relations expertise deal with the situation?

- **Decide that there is a crisis.** The successful handling of a crisis can be decided in the first hours or days. By recognising early in the peace that you actually have a crisis on your hands, you can start to rectify it. The sooner you take action, the better your chances of coming out with your reputation intact.
- **Understand who the media represent.** While "the media" is chasing you for details, the people who are going to be most interested in reading or listening to your response will be "the public" – and that means your members, donors, supporters, businesses, sponsors, potential supporters etc. Frame your responses with the real audience in mind.
- **Decide who will be the spokesperson or public face.** Where possible ensure it is the highest-ranking person (General Secretary, Chairman) who has the mix of authority and access to all the latest information. You also need to have important someone who is accessible and available to journalists. You need to stay on top of a crisis, not create a vacuum where yours is the only voice not being heard.
- **Release as much as you can as quickly as you can.** Sometimes you will be responding to an incident, such as someone getting injured, or a fraud, or a complaint of wrongdoing by an employee, but other times there may be serious and unfounded allegations. The more information you can release that puts the incident in context and puts your side of the story across, the better. And the quicker the better. The sooner you respond and show that you are acting in a sincere, honest and reliable manner, the sooner your voice is listened to and trusted.
- **Avoid the Bart Simpson defence.** What you emphatically do not do is give the Bart Simpson defence – "I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, you can't prove a thing."
- **Say only what you know to be true.** If you don't know the answer, don't guess at it. Be honest and stick to only confirmed information you know to be accurate and correct. If necessary, tell the reporter you don't know but will check it out and get back to them. Better to provide a correct answer than to flail around and guess incorrectly.
- **Remember that first impressions count.** No matter how much they try not to, the media will come with some sort of preconceived idea which normally boils down to whether you or your organisation are sinners or saints (in this particular incident or generally). Your attitude, openness and commitment to resolving the issue is important in ensuring they leave with a positive impression.
- **Work out what you can legally release.** If there are legal issues that come into play, be aware of where the line is drawn on what you can say. Also be aware that many legal advisers will advise you to say nothing at all and that is advice that should be challenged. You have to publicly address the issue, it is only the manner or amount of information that is up for discussion.

- **Avoid speculation or answering hypothetical questions.** Try to stick to the facts and what did happen, not what might have done. You can fend questions off by saying things such as "I don't want to speculate on that" or "I would prefer not to deal in hypotheticals. What we do know is ....."
- **Challenge information you know to be wrong.** Don't leave wrong facts out there. If something is running that's wrong, let others know before it becomes common knowledge. Let the media organisation know the information is wrong and let other organisations know so they don't repeat it. Wrong facts left unchallenged are often more damaging than the truth.
- **Show concern.** You are a community group. Your main mission is to care/service/support the community so you need to be mindful of the feelings as well as the issues. If someone has been badly affected or hurt, mentally or physically, by an action of your group, express your concern and demonstrate your compassion.
- **Don't bother blaming the media.** If there is something wrong, point it out. If you have a different view, point it out. But avoid personal slanging matches. If it is a serious issue you want to be seen to be treating it seriously and dealing with it, not wasting time blaming the media for bringing to light an incident involving your group.
- **Ban the words "no comment".** Forever. Even if you keep repeating the same information you have released. Say: "all I can say is ..." or say "I can't provide that information until I have all the details ..." or "I can't answer that until I have a full report" or "I am happy to try to answer those questions once I have spoken to the right people ..." You never see seasoned media performers respond "No comment". The reason is that it sounds as though you know the answer but don't want to provide it.
- **Don't run from the cameras.** The one piece of vision you are absolutely guaranteed to see on television that night is the vision of someone running from the media, or shielding their face, or slamming the door in their face. Again, it makes you look like someone who has something to hide. If you have nothing new to add, say that.
- **Stay calm.** It's important you stay calm under pressure or swap places with someone who can. Anger makes good vision for TV stations and bad news for community groups. Avoid it.
- **Consider bringing the media into your organisation.** Hold frequent media briefings rather than have reporters camped on the nature strip. It lets them show how you are dealing with the crisis and the difficulties and problems that you face. And that you're human. And that you have nothing to hide.
- **Talk in common, easily understood language.** Avoid jargon. Speak in a manner that ensures people can actually understand the message you are trying to portray.

#### **What if the story is just plain wrong?**

It makes it even more important to react when the story is wrong or malicious. And this does happen. It may not get into print, it may not get on TV but it may cause you some pain dealing with unfounded allegations.

The British Red Cross was recently tainted by allegations that it had overstated the sum raised for Iraqi Kurds in 1991. It hadn't, but that wasn't going to be enough. "We had to very rapidly clarify

our position and committed ourselves to carrying out a thorough investigation," the organisation said afterwards. "Our supporters are essential to us and it is vital that they remain confident in us."

And that is one of the most important aspects of a media crisis. Community groups rely on their credibility. That's what brings in donations, support, members. It is imperative to come out of any crisis with that credibility and standing intact.

## **AUTHORISATION**



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