

Negative Publicity: Do Nonprofits Have a Plan?

Are nonprofits ready to handle a PR crisis? A new survey offers a wake-up call.

BY PREMA NAKRA

The key rule of public relations is: Do something good, and then talk about it. But PR is just as important—if not more so—when an organization does something bad.

To see if nonprofits are prepared for a publicity crisis, we asked executive directors of 200 youth-oriented nonprofits (YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts of the USA, and Girl Scouts of the USA) to answer this question:

Key Question: What process do you have in place to deal with negative publicity?

Tables 1 and 2 show the number of respondents (referred to as frequency or F in the tables), membership type (children or adult), operating budget, and respondents' tenure with the organization.¹ As Table 2 shows, most of the respondents have a long tenure in their leadership position: 75 percent have over five years' experience, and 42 percent have over

18 years' experience. We can thus conclude that they don't have a compelling reason to change the way the organization deals with publicity.

Table 3 gives respondents' answers to the key question.² It shows that 14.7 percent of respondents deal with a negative situation on a case-by-case basis or have a process to call emergency meetings. In a crisis, these organizations deal with local media the best way they can. Around 20 percent of respondents use national resources or

Table 1 - Respondent Organization Profile

Agency Type	F	%	Members-Adult	Members-Children	Operating Budget (\$)
YMCA	6	21.4	1,000-15,000	100-12,500	275k-2.800k
YWCA	7	25.0	500-10,000	200-15,000	390k-2.000k
Girl Scouts	4	14.3	1,600- 8,000	4,800-25,000	1.200k-4.500k
Boy Scouts	11	39.3	1,200-10,100	3,200-63,000	480k-4.000k
Total	28	100.0	1,000-10,100	100-63,000	275k-4.500k

Table 2 - Respondent Profile - Experience on the Job

Experience (years)	Frequency	% of Total
5 or less	7	25.0
6-12	6	21.4
13-17	2	7.1
18-23	2	7.1
24+	8	28.6
No response	3	10.7
Total	28	100.0

national public relations firms to handle all PR activities.

Only 11.8 percent of respondents have guidelines and training to handle negative publicity. And only 17.6 percent have a crisis management team or spokesperson.

What Do the Responses Mean?

These results show that nonprofits hold some deluded notions about

negative publicity. They don't feel much need for a crisis plan, according to our survey, because they don't accept negative publicity as a fact of life. Some feel that negative news won't hurt their image since most news is positive. Some say that negative publicity is usually based on wrong information; thus, it won't have much impact. Others see no need to plan for negative publicity because they have a good reputation in the community. All these rationalizations are false—and dangerous.

Respondents who deal with negative publicity on a case-by-case basis don't feel a need for crisis planning at the local level. This attitude suggests lack of oversight by the national council and lack of ongoing training in media relations.

Some respondents feel confident that the national organization or large public relations firms are handling public relations. These respondents

fail to realize a simple truth: National strategies are effective only if implemented locally.

Since most of the responding organizations have children as members, they are quite vulnerable to incidents such as accidents and abuse. And since most have operating budgets over a million dollars, misappropriation of funds is another big risk.

How Should a Nonprofit Deal with Negative Publicity?

Our survey shows that nonprofits need to be better prepared for negative publicity. Here are guidelines to follow:

- **Anticipate the unexpected.** Brainstorm the possibilities—fire, flood, robbery, embezzlement, a strike, an employee killed on the job, volunteers accused of hurting children in their care.

Your organization may need a new brand of leader.

- **Prepare a crisis communications plan.** Be ready to swing into action at the first hint of negative publicity.
- **Train employees** how to respond to the most likely crises.
- **Appoint one spokesperson** to deal with the media during a crisis. If the crisis will affect the public, choose a second person to keep public officials advised.
- **Don't speculate** about the cause, the cost, or anything else. Tell media only what you know.

Nonprofits also need better training in communication, PR, and media skills. They should start with training in the methods involved in gathering, evaluating, processing, and disseminating news.

- **Provide the media** with a constant stream of positive information about your organization so that you become a familiar source.³
- **Monitor stakeholders' opinions** about your organization and about the entire nonprofit sector.
- **Form good relations** with reporters *before* a crisis occurs.
- **Build a good reputation** by knowing your mission, your key audiences, and your key issues and focusing your communications on these factors.⁴

Table 3 - What process do you have in place to deal with negative publicity?

Response Statements	Responses	
	Frequency	% of total
Deal with on case-by-case basis or emergency meetings. Or deal with it as it arises at the council level or deal with local media the best we can.	5	14.7
Use national resources or have a national policy or use national organization or PR firm to handle it.	7	20.6
Usually avoid negative publicity—have no negative publicity or have good reputation. Have positive PR both nationally and locally.	3	8.8
Executive director and board deal with it.	1	2.9
Have guidelines and training on how to handle it.	4	11.8
Have crisis communications program, crisis management team, or spokesperson, close communications to handle issues, media committee, and proactive planning.	6	17.6
None	4	11.8
No response	4	11.8
Total responses	34	100.0

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Finally, prepare policies covering your employees, communications, finances, and ethics. Put these policies in writing, and be sure everyone understands and abides by them.

Does Your Organization Need a New Leader?

This survey raises red flags about how nonprofits respond to crises. The guidelines presented here are crucial. Begin by conducting a self-audit to see how many of these guidelines you are following. Then find ways to implement them all.

You may find that your organization needs a new brand of leader. You can't operate with leaders who say they don't have time to "hold hands" or believe the best way to handle a crisis is to ignore it till it goes away. You need someone visible, with an

up-front leadership style and a proactive PR strategy. If finding new leadership is the only way to implement a crisis plan, then that's the place to start. ■

Footnotes

¹Of the 38 responses, only 28 were usable for inclusion in the findings. While sample size and response rates don't represent the entire population, the survey responses clearly indicate a need for nonprofits to prepare more thoroughly for negative publicity.

²It wasn't possible to get an in-depth analysis based on respondents' experience or operating budget, since such tabulation didn't indicate any results specific to a particular type of respondent. Response statements were developed from the actual questionnaires. Since some respondents provided multiple statements, the total number of responses was greater than the total number of respondents.

³See Salzman in "References."

⁴See *Public Relations and Communications, Leadership Series, Volumes I and II* (Jill Muehrcke, ed.) in "References."

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center (www.danenet.org/snpo, 608-274-9777).



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