



news

When the News Isn't Great

Protect your organization's integrity when things go wrong.

By Carole Howell

For all your organization's good work, sometimes mistakes, real or perceived, happen. How you respond to the media can make the difference between a stumble and a freefall. Hiding under your desk isn't an option. Deafening silence doesn't instill trust.

Follow Five Media Rules

You may be able to avoid the situation in the first place with clear, solid policies. But that isn't always enough. Reporters like stories that involve conflict, criticism, and controversy, so when the news is negative and the reporter is looking for answers, there are five key things you should know to protect your organization's good name.

“Use your own media voices to get your story out.”

1. DON'T WING IT!

Being prepared is an important element in facing the press, and that doesn't mean straightening your tie or freshening your makeup. Start by anticipating bad press *before* the reporters call.

Put together a team of people including your attorney, board chair, public relations officer, human resources director, and anyone else in your organization who's involved in what happened. Together, examine the facts and decide what your organization's stance will be.

Choose one person to be the official spokesperson. Make sure your staff understands that this person will be the only liaison to reporters.

Think of the most negative query you can imagine. Be sure you have a clear, honest, and appropriate answer.

Create three main points to emphasize.

Consider calling the media for a courtesy “heads up” to explain the situation. Hearing your side first may help diffuse the issue before it has blown out of proportion.

When the call comes, remember that all reporters are working on deadlines, so it's important to respond quickly. If you must buy time, make it brief. Call back with an update within an hour. Don't forget that if reporters don't get a statement from you, they'll find it somewhere else.

2. THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "OFF THE RECORD."

Once the reporter has entered the room or is on the phone with you, the interview begins. It's common for the reporter to begin chatting with you while the photographer is setting up, before the official interview begins. Anything you say is fair game. What you say when your guard is down can add fuel to the fire. Control your chatter and stick to your main points. Stop talking when you've answered the question. Remember you're "on the record" until the microphone and the reporter have left the room.

3. TAKE YOUR TIME.

Once you start talking, focus on your central message, and don't let reporters rattle you. Keep these tips in mind:

A common device used by reporters is "machine-gunning" – asking multiple questions at once. Listen carefully. Pick the question you want to answer – the one that corresponds with your main message. Ignore the rest.

If you can't answer a question, explain why.

If the reporter strays from the agenda, simply say that it's outside your area of expertise and repeat your own message.

Keep answers – especially for TV or radio – to 25 to 40 seconds each.

Use a technique called "bridging" to help you control the interview and keep it on track. A bridge creates a transition back to your key message. Bridging phrases like "It's important to remember that . . ." and "Before we continue, let me say again that . . ." will help you maintain control. Don't let reporters put words in your mouth. Continue to emphasize your main points.

Always be cordial and cooperative; getting angry with a reporter is like waving a red flag in front of a bull, and can never lead to a positive outcome. During a tense situation, it's best to be transparent and honest to avoid speculation.

4. EDUCATE AND COMMUNICATE.

In your interviews, you're speaking not only to reporters but to their readers, listeners, or viewers. What do you want them to know? Take this chance to educate the public. Prepare and share fact sheets of your key messages,

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supporting data, and background information on your organization.

5. MONITOR AND FOLLOW UP.

The interview is only the tip of the iceberg. Monitor your coverage. That includes any statements made on Facebook, Twitter, local blogs, or on the media's own websites. A simple, free Google Alert can help. If you're misquoted or your statement is taken out of context, you have the right to call the reporter to ask for a correction or another interview to clarify the issue.

Think Beyond the Press Release

By far, the greatest tool in your public relations toolkit is the trust and goodwill you bank long before the news is negative. Pitch great stories to the press, and establish a rapport with local news agencies. Building a network of supportive reporters will pay dividends when the news is bad.

Most of the time, the news you have to share is positive. Use your own media voices to get your story out by keeping your website and blog fresh. Take full advantage of Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest to promote your own positive image. That's good to keep in mind not just when bad news breaks, but every single day. 

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Your Media Toolkit

Guard against bad press and promote your mission with these *Nonprofit World* articles from the Society's library (NonprofitWorld.org):

Using the New Media to Promote Your Mission and Protect Your Reputation (Vol. 24, No. 1)

When You're Forced to Say "No Comment" (Vol. 22, No. 4)

Negative Publicity: Do Nonprofits Have a Plan? (Vol. 18, No. 6)

When Reality Becomes Image: Dealing with the Media (Vol. 12, No. 5)

In the Hot Seat: How to Respond to Pressure Groups (Vol. 12, No. 4)

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