

When You're Forced to Say

“No Comment”

Should you ever refuse to comment?
Will you ruin your organization's reputation if you do?

BY MARC JAMPOLE

Most of us have read, seen, or heard news stories in which a nonprofit organization refuses to say anything. Our first reaction is usually some version of “What do they have to hide?” or “Why are they keeping important information from the public?”

Often, however, legal, ethical, or business constraints prevent an organization from making a comment. Here are some examples of situations in which answering simple questions may get an organization into trouble:

- Giving details or mentioning the name of a rogue employee who committed a crime may violate an organization's confidentiality policy and, in certain circumstances, may be against the law as well.
- In any healthcare or social service setting, giving details or even mentioning the names of patients or clients breaches confidentiality and other laws.
- If an organization is negotiating to buy a piece of property for a new facility, publicly acknowledging those negotiations usually puts the organization in a weaker negotiating position because of the suddenly raised expectations of customers and employees.

These examples represent a small number of ever-growing legal and ethical

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constraints that can restrict what your organization says in public. Yet you want your organization to be perceived as candid and truthful. What can you do?

What to Do in the Short Term

Even when giving a “no comment,” you can show that you're open and honest while following the law and upholding your ethical policies. Here are some simple tactics that can save your organization's reputation for honesty and openness even when you must refuse to answer questions:

- **Select a spokesperson** who is friendly and personable, understands the organization, and has been trained in giving organizational

messages simply and accurately. The spokesperson can be your organization's leader, a well-respected board member, the top communications professional, or an outside communications consultant. It should never be your organization's general counsel or an outside attorney. It's not that attorneys can't be articulate and friendly. But the very fact that an organization has selected an attorney to serve as spokesperson will send a message to many that the organization has something to hide.

- **Always explain why** you can't comment. When an organization tells the news media or other important constituencies why it can't answer the question, instead of people thinking, “The organization has something to hide,” they think, “The organization is between a rock and a hard place on this one.”
- **Share information** that can be disclosed. Just because you can't say everything doesn't mean you can't say anything. On the other hand, no organization is obligated to reveal information that is harmful, proprietary, or confidential. Deter-

mining what information to share, and when, is perhaps the key question in any communications decision.

- **Call people back** as soon as the organization can say something. Contact anyone who asked a question, and provide the answer as soon as you can.

What to Do in the Long Term

- **Engage in a continual program** to communicate to your markets, employees, and the communities in which your organization operates. This program should communicate your mission and the fact that your organization is open and caring. The current jargon for such a program is reputation management.
- **Share important news**, such as new grants, products, and employees, with all your important constituencies. Highlight your accomplishments on a regular basis. A key message in all public communications should be the benefits your organization provides to its key constituencies.

Establishing that your organization is honest and that it benefits the community and the economy creates good will that will help you through a crisis or other period in which you can't communicate. It will also enhance employee satisfaction, attract donations, and help you achieve other important goals. ■

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Do You Want to Learn More?

For more on building your organization's reputation in bad times and good, see these *Nonprofit World* resources in the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org:

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

How to Handle a Crisis, Vol. 12, No. 1.

Achieving an Admired Organization, Vol. 11, No. 5.

Nonprofit Communications on a Shoestring: Thriving in the Midst of Crisis, Vol. 8, No. 2.

Public Relations and Communications, *Nonprofit World* CD-ROM.

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