

Dealing with the media after workplace accidents

While business owners can do all they can to keep their staff safe, workplace accidents causing serious injury or death are always possible. When they happen, it's vital that a competent spokesperson engages with interested media.

How a company deals with the media in a crisis like this or any other adverse event can make or break its future success. That's because public opinion is far more interested in how a company responds to the situation than the crisis itself.

The problem is that most businesses are unprepared for the media scrutiny, believing they will never face a crisis. But to constitute a crisis for a small or medium business, it doesn't have to be a massive earthquake or a mining disaster. It could involve workplace accidents, redundancy disputes, sexual harassment accusations, crime or a multitude of other causes.

Every business in New Zealand could find itself in the middle of a crisis when they least expect it. Recently, we had the Tree Adventures death in Auckland, the receivership of Mainzeal, the death of a woman being linked to heavy Coca Cola consumption, the implication of a company over the death of two school students, and Jetstar's initial refusal to change the flight arrangements of a shark attack victim's mother. I could go on, and there are many smaller ones affecting small businesses.

A crisis can take many forms. The key is to recognise this and learn how to handle approaches from the media before anything happens. If the crisis hits before you know what to do, it could be too late. For example, what would you do if a TV reporter and a cameraman arrived at your house as you were leaving for work asking you about a sexual harassment complaint that had just been laid against a staff member?

The last thing you should do is run, look angry, try to push the camera away or say 'no comment'. These things all make you look guilty and are great pictures for the TV news. This is probably what the news crew is looking for. What you should do is confidently say with a smile that you will look straight into it and you'll be available for an interview at your office in two hours, or so. That way there is no publishable footage for the news, you looked relaxed and when you do see the reporter in two hours, you will be ready with your response.

Those who have been media trained will then know how to control the interview, getting their points across, rather than defensively answering the questions thrown at them. It's important that you do front up to the media. Firstly, if you are not there to clarify the situation, it could get blown out of proportion. That's because the media will find someone else to comment, and that person will not know as much as you. It could also be a competitor.



Research shows that this is vital. It shows that a crisis itself rarely affects a business negatively. What does cause problems is how the crisis is handled. While business leaders cannot eliminate the possibility of a crisis, if they respond quickly, professionally and communicate well, their business can actually prosper.

It's also important to note that you don't need to accept responsibility or say anything that may later be used against you. What you focus on is your empathy for the victims and what you are doing to help. If your lawyer advises you not to comment at all, you need to weigh that up with the potential reputational damage you may suffer. By focusing on empathy and helping people, you will do yourself no harm and may actually improve your reputation in the process.

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