

HOME SERVICE FRANCHISES AT RISK OF BRAND DAMAGE

Any franchise where staff enter private property to perform their service is at risk of brand damage. For example, what if someone is caught on camera doing something inappropriate?, what if a worker is accused of stealing something? or what if the client alleges that faulty workmanship led to a serious injury? I could go on and allegations like this are usually untrue but still cause massive damage.

Such scenarios happen and quickly make it onto social media and then into mainstream media, whether they are true or not. Without a plan to deal with this, it's not only the franchisee at the centre of the issue who can suffer, but everyone in the network. There are multiple examples.

What's the answer?

The key is knowing what to do and have the ability to react immediately. If the story does make it to mainstream media, the last thing you want it to say is: "The franchise refused to comment."

This is why you need a simple Crisis Communication Plan for your entire network that outlines exactly what would happen in these situations. In my experience, few franchises have such plans despite how high the stakes are. There are usually one of two reasons for this. It's common for them to think they won't need one because nothing will happen that could require one. This is a mistake. There are many things that could go wrong that lead to sudden and damaging media and public scrutiny. I've already outlined a few for home service businesses and unfounded allegations are common.

The other reason for not having a plan is the belief that a public relations company or the inhouse public relations team could be called in to fix the situation. This may have been

possible 10 years ago, but not today with the internet and social media. You still need these people on hand, but you also need a plan.

In the 21st Century, your success in dealing with bad news will be dependent on the speed of your response. Media will swoop on a franchisee within minutes, fling a microphone in his or her face, and that may end up on tonight's television news. Do your franchisees know what to do in these situations and on social media? Is there a plan to deal with all this so you are on the front foot when something does erupt. There have been multiple examples in Australia over the last few years where a failure to have such a plan has severely damaged franchises, some fatally.

So how do you put a Crisis Communication Plan together?

Step One: Assign roles for your crisis communication team

There are a number of roles that need to be filled both before and during a crisis or negative event. Someone needs to lead the communication response from head office, media spokespeople need to be identified and trained, while other roles include an Online Manager and Media Liaison Officer. Remember that franchisees will also need to be in the loop as the issue is likely to emerge from one of them.

Step Two: Predict crises and prepare statements

The best way to plan is to predict what could go wrong and prepare brief holding statements for those scenarios. These can then be tailored on the day and sent out quickly. It's too late to do it when something happens and it'll be too late to get a public relations person to write it. The success of your response in today's world is determined by how fast you react.

Step Three: (Create list of core people)

You need a list of everyone you may need to contact in a crisis. Obviously, this includes your crisis communication team, but also

other franchisees, a public relations person to help as the situation develops, possibly your lawyer, possibly your insurer and others. Every franchise is different and will have different groups to contact. This may need to be done by franchisees at the local level and the franchisor at the national level.

Step Four: (Have multiple ways of contacting everyone)

You need two or even three ways of contacting your relevant stakeholders. Obviously, the nature of the issue will determine who needs to be prioritised, but generally telephone, email and text message should be available for everyone. Failure to contact the right people quickly is a common reason for failure during a crisis response. You will want stakeholders to hear the news from you before they hear it in the news media and on social media. This contact information should all be in the same place in your plan.

Step Five: Places to organise

There are important places to organise before you may have a crisis or issue. If media arrive at reception, who will be responsible for them and where will they be taken? Also, if it's very serious, you may need to hold a Press Conference. Where would that be? You don't want to leave these decisions to crisis day.

All of these things need to come together to form your plan, plus other additional documents such as Staff Guidelines focused on traditional and social media. There are crisis communication plans out there that literally have hundreds of pages. That's far too detailed and would never be used on the day. There are other plans that literally include a few bullet points. These are equally as ineffective. You need something practical, simple and brief that everyone understands and everyone needs to know what their role is. It doesn't have to take long to put together either. But failure to do so is a huge risk, particularly when you understand how important your brand reputation is to the success of your network and every franchisee in it.



Pete Burdon is Founder and Head Trainer of Franchise Media Training, a business that produces crisis communication plans (generic and tailored) for franchises and conducts media interview training workshops.

For more information, visit FranchiseMediaTraining.com or email office@FranchiseMediaTraining.com



Here are 5 key steps to mastering media interviews

Step One: Buy some time and find out what they want

When the journalist first contacts you, it's important that you buy some time. Never do an interview on the spot. But having said that, don't wait too long. You do have some breathing space if a statement has been sent out, but if you want to control the situation, you need to be available to media.

Step Two: Create your media message

The next step is to prepare your media message. This is the three most important things you want to say on the issue. You must be able to sum these up in 25 seconds. They must be of interest to the audience of the media outlet. Your plan will be to transfer back to these throughout the interview so that they become the focus.

Step Three: Predict difficult questions

While your aim in the interview will be to keep using bridging statements to get back to your key points, you do need to answer questions asked of you. That's why you must predict the difficult questions (in negative situations). Don't spend hours on this but do look for the obvious ones and have brief answers ready for them.

Step Four: Dress up your points in interesting ways

For each of your three key points, dress them up with attractive language. For example, by using analogies, examples and emotion. This gives reporters and producers good material to use in their stories while also maximising the chances of your points becoming the focus. This will also stop you sounding like a broken record because you will have different ways of making the same points.

Step Five: Practice, Practice, Practice

This is the most important step of all. The theory is one thing, but putting it into practice is quite another. This is why media training is vital.

Trained media spokespeople

The ability of your media spokespeople to handle media interviews when the stakes are high is also absolutely crucial when it comes to being ready for that crisis or negative event. Lots of people think that because they are good presenters, they will be good media spokespeople. The problem is that a media interview is like no other conversation or presentation you will ever have and must be handled completely differently.

That's because only snippets of what you say will ever make it into the story the reporter or producer puts together. Here's an example. Let's say a home service worker makes a genuine mistake and your best option is for a spokesperson to front media. The reporter asks you, "Can you guarantee this won't happen again?" Of course you can't guarantee that, but you can't say so. If you do, the headline could read, "Franchisor admits another incident possible." That could be the entire focus of the story and the positive comments you made during the rest of the interview could be totally overlooked. This happens.

My recommendation in a situation like this is to answer the question by saying what you can guarantee. For example, "What I can guarantee is that we have a rigorous training process in place and our safety procedures are of the highest order." There are also ways of dealing with this if you get the same question again.

However, the key with these interviews is having your own message to get across and finding exciting ways of making it. Then you continually transfer back to your message in different ways without sounding like a broken record. This can easily be done but it needs training and practice. It's important that your message is of interest to the media outlet's audience.

By the way, it's almost always better to front, particularly if there is a victim. Focusing on empathy and what you are doing to fix the situation can actually grow the reputation of the franchise, while failing to appear usually

damages it. But the spokesperson does need to know how to come across as genuine, get a message across and deal with those tough questions.

Recent examples have clearly shown that this isn't understood by many franchise leaders. Lots of those who have fronted for media have not understood the traps they can fall into and very few appear to have a message of their own to share. They usually treat media interviews as Q&As with reporters and presenters. They are not. They are conversations where they can share their points, while negotiating the difficult questions in the process.

There are also another group of franchise leaders who refuse to talk to reporters for fear of humiliation. This is understandable if they don't know how to deal with difficult interviews when the stakes are high. However, failure to appear leads to heavily unbalanced stories. If you are the franchise leader at the centre of a crisis, media will come to you first. This is your chance to control the story and flow of information. But if you refuse, the story will say you refused to comment and the entire story will be focused on the views of your detractors.

One thing I must point out is that there are two parts to mastering media interview skills. There is knowing what to do and doing it. It's important to know how to control interviews. But the only way to master the art is through practice. That's by sitting in front of a camera with someone asking you the questions on these scenarios before watching them back. Just like your crisis communication plan needs to be in place well before you need it, so do the media skills of your spokespeople. The horse has already bolted when something happens.

Developing a crisis communication plan and training a few spokespeople doesn't have to take lots of time or money. But believe me from experience, if you are not ready when that inevitable issue or crisis erupts, the result can be disastrous. ❖