

IS YOUR FRANCHISE READY FOR NEWS MEDIA ATTENTION IF COVID-19 OR ANOTHER NEGATIVE ISSUE COMES YOUR WAY?

Covid-19 is the latest issue where both franchisees and franchisors can be thrust into the national media spotlight without warning.

Are you ready for that? If not, the reputation hit can severely damage the bottom lines of everyone across your franchise system.

What's the answer?

There are two things that every franchise needs in place as an insurance policy against this happening. This is not just relevant to Covid-19, but a myriad of other issues that can negatively affect a franchise. In the Home Improvement Industry, this could be anything from an allegation of a



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worker doing something inappropriate while working alone in a private residence to a serious accident that brings into question the quality of workmanship.

The damage of such issues can be multiplied in the Franchise sector because there are ample examples of entire networks suffering financial damage because of one allegation made against one franchisee.

The answer is twofold. Firstly, a Crisis Communication Plan that outlines exactly what to do if this does eventuate, and secondly, head office needs two spokespeople who know how to talk to media. Not just those who are good communicators, but those who understand how a media interview is quite unlike any other conversation and how to master it.

Putting all this in place doesn't have to take long but is absolutely vital. Warren Buffett summed this up best by the following quote: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

I have heard some franchise leaders say that the media can just wait when a serious issue hits, but that doesn't work in this age of 24/7 news and social media. If the franchise doesn't communicate quickly and effectively with its own community and the media, it will be made out to be a villain rather than a victim because it appears the leadership either don't care or don't know what is going on. They pay a heavy price for this on social and traditional media where others start to speculate about what is happening and detractors are only too willing to share their views through their own channels and by talking to reporters.

What should the Crisis Communication Plan have in it?

The first thing the plan needs is pre-prepared holding statements on possible scenarios. These are short media releases that say very little, but let your community and media know that you are aware of the situation and are doing all that you can to resolve it, or support those affected. That lets your community know you are in control and means you will feature in early news stories about the issue. The alternative is a line in news stories saying, "The franchise refused to comment." That is never a good look and suggests that you are hiding something. Those stories then make their way into social media where people comment on them.

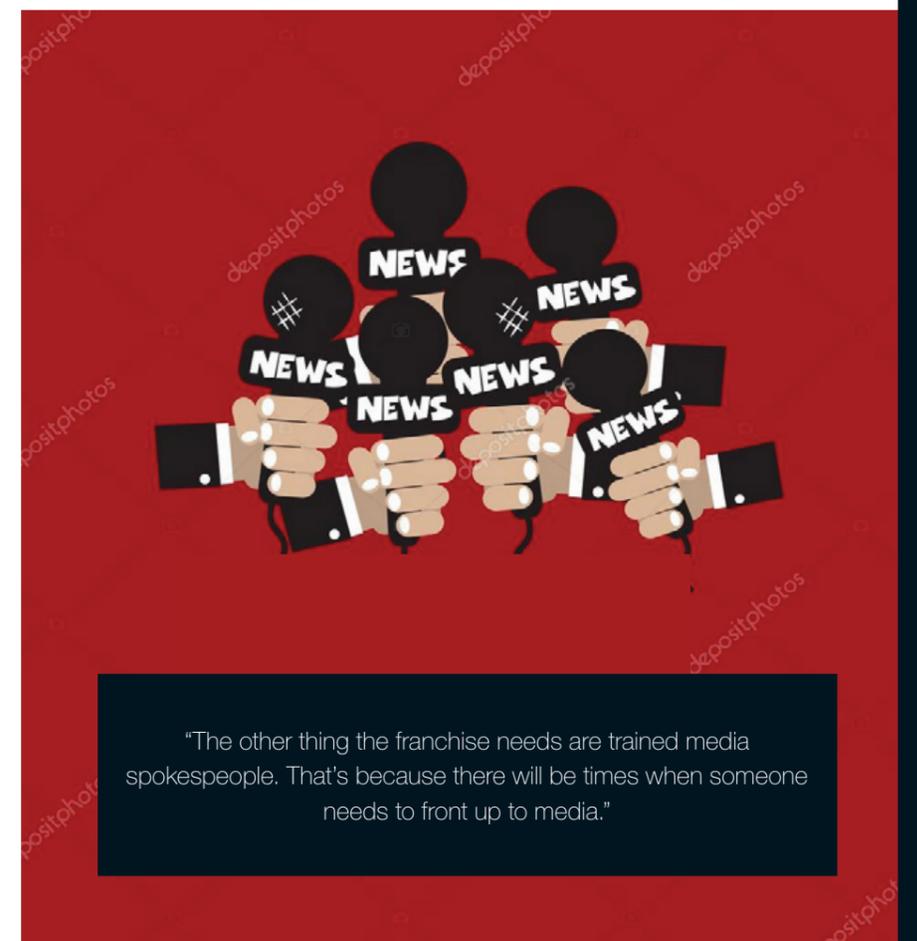
Secondly, there are various roles that need to be filled. Someone has to lead the communication response, and this is unlikely to be the Franchisor or CEO because he/she will be too busy with other tasks. If you have a communications team, the leader of that would hold this position, otherwise someone else from head office. This person oversees the entire communication response. For example, one of those jobs will be getting the relevant holding statement to every franchisee so they can give it to media who arrive on the scene. This person will also make sure that everyone understands the staff guidelines, which would include a strict rule that no-one actually talks to media, but just hands them the statement with the spokesperson's details at the bottom.

The spokesperson position is usually held by the Franchisor or CEO. It's best to use only one per issue if possible, but sometimes two are needed. More on media interview skills coming shortly.

The Online Manager is another vital role. This involves monitoring social media, and not just the franchise sites. There will be times when misinformation must be corrected and messages shared with your community.

The plan also needs contact information for multiple people, different channels to communicate with them, while a number of places need to be organised to accommodate different groups when a negative issue strikes. For example, where to put reporters when they arrive at either head office or a franchise location.

While there is more to a Franchise Crisis Communication Plan than can be explained in this article, it's not difficult to prepare and doesn't have to take long. However, it does need to be done because there's nothing more stressful than dealing with an issue like this without a plan of action. It's too late



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to plan once something happens and the days are gone when you can just call in a PR company. That takes too long and the horse will have bolted.

Media Interview Skills

The other thing the franchise needs are trained media spokespeople. That's because there will be times when someone needs to front up to media. Often a statement will work at the outset, but later media will demand to talk. It's usually best to agree to this because it gives you the power to control the story, rather than leave that to others who may not be sympathetic or communicate misinformation.

With most media interviews, reporters only use snippets of your conversation. That's why you need a clear message and the skills to return to it regularly. You also need to know how to package your message in media friendly ways. By doing this, you have far more control over what they focus on in their stories than you may believe. Often stories are negative because the spokesperson didn't give any interesting information that could be packaged properly to create a good story.

By being ready with a plan and media trained spokespeople, you can mitigate any damage and sometimes even turn it to your

advantage. For example, if there is a victim and your message is focused on empathy and explaining what you will do to correct the situation, your reputation can grow. That's because people care more about how you respond to a situation than the fact it happened in the first place. But by failing to have a plan, you won't be able to respond before people make up their mind whether you are the victim or villain. Then you spend all your time trying to change their minds, which is a lot harder than communicating with them while they are still forming their opinion. Also, untrained media spokespeople can fall into many invisible traps, while most look for any possible excuse to avoid talking to the media for fear of humiliation. Don't let this be your franchise. Look at this preparation like a fire drill, or an insurance policy against your reputation.

Pete Burdon is the founder and head trainer at Franchise Media Training. He is a former daily newspaper reporter and government press secretary. Check out his free Online Masterclass: "The Franchise Leader's Survival Guide to Dealing with the New Media when the Stakes are High," at www.FranchiseMediaTraining.com.

