

Dealing with the media in a crisis

A crisis or adverse event can hit any business at any time. It could be as serious as a fire killing employees or less severe such as staff walking off the job. Crises can harm reputations and bottom lines. In some cases, they even trigger business failure. Often, it is how businesses respond to the crisis through the media that determines what impact it will have. That's why it's vital they are equipped to handle the media scrutiny they may suddenly find themselves under.



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1 Be prepared
Unfortunately most businesses that find themselves under this media scrutiny have no idea how to deal with it. That's why they need to be prepared before anything happens. This means selecting a spokesperson to represent the company through the media before a crisis hits. That person needs to be media trained so he or she knows what the media wants, how to give it to them, while also maintaining the reputation of the company.

2 Understand the media need a story
There's no point looking at the media as an enemy. Reporters are just doing their job of writing and producing stories. If it's big news, they will cover it. In lots of crises, you can also use the media. For example, you can ask them to broadcast telephone help lines.

3 Always be available
If you are at the centre of the crisis, reporters will contact you. It's important that you be available to answer their questions at all times. This is your opportunity to control the story. If you don't comment, they will find other sources that may be less sympathetic to your cause, or even give incorrect information. Without your input, one-sided and incorrect stories can be produced. These can prolong the crisis or imply that it is worse than it is.

4 Create a media message
You need to prepare three points you want to get across when talking to journalists and refer back to these as often as possible. If the crisis is one where people have been injured, one of these should always be regret. For example, "We really feel for those affected and will

give them all the support they need to get through this." Another one could be what you are doing to fix the situation, while the other could be what you are doing to stop it happening again. While you should always have a three point media message, the actual points may obviously differ from these if the crisis is less serious.

5 Question your lawyers
While you will need to take legal advice on what you can say to the media, be wary if lawyers advise you not to comment. Their focus is to keep you out of jail, while public relations consultants and media trainers are concerned about the court of public opinion. If a lawyer tells you not to comment, you have to weigh that up with how that will come across to the public and your stakeholders. Failure to front up in a crisis can have major implications for your long-term business viability.

6 Avoid speculation
Never speculate. For example, you may be asked: "What will you do if you are found to be responsible for this accident?" Never fall into this trap. Stick to the facts and what did happen, not what might have. You can fend questions off by saying things such as "I don't want to speculate on that" or "I would prefer not to deal in hypotheticals." **M**

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