



# Being Prepared:

## Is your organisation ready for negative media attention?

As the Internet and social media have become such popular communication tools, all organisations need to be prepared for that unwanted call from a reporter about something that could be a threat to a reputation that has taken a lot of great work and effort to build. It could be something that happens in the day-to-day running of your organisation, something that happens in your sector (not necessarily related to your organisation), or an allegation on Facebook that may not even be true, that catches the attention of media. What can you do to be prepared? Like insurance, you may never need it, but it's great to have it in place.

We've all seen the headlines. In most cases the response when approached by media is to avoid talking at all costs, but that's usually the worst possible approach. The resulting stories will probably say the spokesperson refused to comment. Research shows that most people believe the organisation is guilty of something when this happens. It also prevents your organisation from putting forward its case.

### What should you do to be ready?

There are two things your organisation needs to do to prepare for negative media attention:

1. You need people who are trained to talk to the news media, at least two is good, and
2. You need a basic Crisis Communication Plan that states exactly what to do.

### Why do spokespersons need media training?

Most spokespersons will treat an interview with the media as a Q&A. They answer the question asked and wait for the next. That seems like the correct approach because it's how we communicate in every other part of our life. A media interview is a

different ball game. You need your own message and the skills to get it across. Otherwise, the reporter has all the power and you have no chance of influencing what is covered in the story they write.

It can also increase the chance of being misquoted or quoted out of context. With all print media interviews, and broadcast interviews that aren't live, only snippets of your interview will make it into the story. You need the skills to continually refer back to your points to ensure they are the focus of the story. This takes practise to master, you still need to answer the question, then transfer back to your message without sounding like a broken record.

### How do you do this?

You need to create the points that you want the reporter to use. You then dress your points up by using interesting language like analogies and examples. Your analogies and examples are attractive to the reporter, and you have a number of different ways of expressing the same point.

The ability to create these points, dress them up and then get them into the story is a skill. It takes practise but, once mastered, can turn media interviews about negative situations from perceived threats into major opportunities.

If you want examples of modelling what this looks like, politicians can help you learn. A recent example from David Seymour. He was asked his thoughts about a suggestion to increase the bright-line test to control run-away house prices. At one stage in the interview, he said he thought it was a bad idea. Later he dressed up his point into the following analogy: "Trying to end a shortage of housing by increasing the bright-line test is like trying to end a famine by increasing the tax on food." That analogy got used extensively in many stories and quotes. It made his point and gave

the media a soundbite that helped bring their stories to life. This should always be your focus. Get your points across in a way that will help the reporter produce a good story.

### Creating a Crisis Communication Plan

As well as effective media spokespersons, you need a Crisis Communication Plan. The last thing you need if something goes wrong is to have to think about who should respond and how you will respond.

The foundation for your Crisis Communication Plan is your Media Policy. Your Media Policy is created by your board or committee. Amongst other things, it sets out who the spokespersons are for your organisation and the steps to be followed for media enquiries. Everyone in your organisation should be aware of your Media Policy.

Your Crisis Communication Plan sets out the steps to follow for different potential situations, specifically how you will communicate and respond. It's about making a plan before you need it. I've seen crisis communication plans of all shapes and sizes, from hundreds of pages to a list of bullet points. The best ones are brief, while including the essentials. It's something that you can create as a team, your governing group and the person who is responsible for day-to-day operations, or an outside expert can help you put one together.

#### Step 1: Brainstorm a list of your organisations most likely risk scenarios

Bearing in mind what you do as an organisation, what are the scenarios that have the potential to be the subject of negative media should something go wrong? List them all then prioritise them, which are the most likely?

#### Step 2: Create holding statements for your most likely risk scenarios

Write a brief media statement for the scenario you have identified. These



are known as holding statements. If the scenario actually takes place, your holding statements can be tailored and sent to media quickly.

Reporters want to get a story out. They will write the story, whether you are in it or not, and send it out through social media immediately. You are best to say something, however brief, rather than be quoted as saying "no comment."

As an example, imagine there is an allegation made about one of your team. Your holding statement may say something like, "We take all allegations extremely seriously and we are looking into this immediately." The statement gives you time to get organised and it will satisfy media audiences at the outset.

Also remember that media sites rank highly on search engines. People searching for your organisation will likely see stories on page 1 of search results for some time. It's vital that you are quoted as saying you are aware of the situation and are looking into it, or something similar, depending on the issue. You don't want stories to say, "the spokesperson refused to comment."

**Step 3: Define roles for each scenario**  
There are key roles in a crisis. These need to be identified well in advance. Your Media Policy will set out who your spokespersons are. There may be other roles depending on the situation:

- Crisis communication co-ordinator - Oversees your whole communication response, liaising with your team and media (outside official interviews) and keeping updated on the actual issue so that developments can be communicated.
- Online communications co-ordinator - They will be monitoring social media channels as part of their role and can see how people are commenting. The person in this role will often notice concerns before they turn into a full-blown crisis. Who is responsible for correcting misinformation online on a day-to-day basis? How does that change in a crisis - who needs to know, who will let them know, how will they be informed and who will respond?

**Step 4: Who else do you need to contact?**

There will be other stakeholders you want to contact so they hear news from you before hearing through the media. Create a list of your core stakeholders, identify who should get in touch with them in a crisis and include multiple ways to get in touch, e.g. Do you have a lawyer on speed dial? Do you have personal phone numbers of your most important donors? You always need an up-to-date contact list and a variety of ways to contact.

Preparing to communicate through an issue that threatens your reputation is relatively simple. We can't cover off everything in detail here, the steps we have shared are an important start. Being prepared doesn't have to take a lot of time and money. But it is vital. As Warren Buffett says, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently".

It is too late to contact a PR company once something happens. You might call them in to help, but you'll need to get the ball rolling yourself because the success or failure of your response will be determined by the speed at which you move. It's important to develop a plan and train your spokespersons before they are needed. It's an insurance policy for your reputation.



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