Always on the Record: Crisis Management, the Media and Your Nonprofit

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications, Enterprise Risk Management

There's no time like the present to begin making a list of "New Year's Resolutions" for your nonprofit. The good news is that you don't need to actually start tackling the "to do" items until after you've flipped your wall calendar to 2003. One of the items that should be at the top of any nonprofit's list is the development of a crisis management plan.

More good news, there's no need to start with stone tablets; help is available. This article explores dealing with the media during a crisis. For practical help on this topic (including forms and sample documents you can prepare in advance of the crisis) and many others, see *Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving a Crisis in a Nonprofit*. This affordable, easy-to-understand and easy-to-digest publication can be ordered with a few clicks of the mouse here. And best of all, if you place an order during the next two weeks, the book will arrive just in time to help you begin tackling Resolution #1 on your to do list for "next year."

Where to Start? Understand the Media.

A good starting point in dealing effectively with the media during a crisis is to try to appreciate the ability of the media to play a crucial role in your crisis. It's also helpful to understand the motivations and agenda of the media. With respect to their interest in your crisis, generally speaking, media representatives will be looking for an engaging story, trying to determine the cause of the crisis, and hoping to identify the heroes and villains in the story. Much of how they respond to, react to and report a story will result from the non-negotiable deadlines of the business.

Media outlets compete to be the first to report a story, and reporters are under constant deadline pressure. Few have the luxury of reporting a story only after all the facts have come out. So it's important to understand that your story — if it's the type that would engage reader, listener or viewer interest — *will be reported*, with or without your assistance. It's rarely wise to refuse to cooperate with the media or to say, "No comment." It sounds bad and many will assume that you are hiding something. However, there are questions you won't want to answer because of how they are phrased. The age-old example is "When did you stop beating your wife?" You can always choose not to directly answer a reporter's question, and instead deliver the message you want the public to hear. In the case of the age-old example, your answer, stated in an even tone with a smile, might be "I'm a bachelor," or "I don't beat my wife or anyone, for that matter." And a word to the wise, there is no such thing as "off the record." If you say it, it's fair game.

Many resources are available on media relations. Some of the most practical and potentially valuable advice from experts in the field includes the following:

- *Be clear about what you want the media to know*. You control what you tell them about the organization and the incident.
- *Always tell the truth*. Mike Seymour and Simon Moore in their book*, Effective Crisis Management*, call this advice the critical "Three Ts" of crisis communications (Tell the Truth).
- *Don't feel that you need to tell the media everything you know*. In fact, it may be dangerous to do so,

since you then give the reporter the chance to pick the sound bite that will air — and it may be a phrase or comment that hurts you when taken out of context.

- Where possible, *stick to the prepared text.* The written documents in your communications strategy are essential tools for surviving media interviews. Think of your fact sheet as more than a list of talking points; essentially, it's, your script.
- *If you don't know, say so*. If feasible, agree to try to find the answer and indicate you'll get back to the reporter. *Don't be a cynic, be sincere.* The resident cynic in your office may not be your most effective media spokesperson. Choose someone who is comfortably and convincingly sincere.
- *Accommodate reasonable requests*. On occasion a reporter will make a special request, such as requesting that an introduction to a news piece be taped in front of your organization's entry, or an interview be held at the location of an incident rather than in an office. If it's possible to accommodate a special request without jeopardizing your crisis communications plan, be cooperative.
- *Admit when a mistake has been made*. In some cases admitting that a mistake has been made is the first step to re-establishing credibility and confidence with key constituencies.
- *Don't ignore requests from the media or evade interviews*. Playing hide-'n'-seek has the potential to cause a great deal of harm, as the reporter you're avoiding will try to find *someone* to speak to about the situation. Someone almost always surfaces and it's possible that person won't be an effective representative of your organization or position. Why put the selection of a spokesperson in the hands of a potentially uninformed reporter?
- *Designate a backup for your spokesperson in the event your spokesperson is unavailable or is the subject of the crisis*. Both the spokesperson and the backup should be trained, articulate, sincere and persuasive.

Click here to review the table of contents for *Vital Signs.* While there, you can also read a review of the book published in *The Outdoor Network*, Winter 2003.

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