

Public Relations in Time of Crisis

Keeping Cool When on the Hot Seat

When trouble looms, there is precious little time to react before a story spins out of control. Follow this guide to help your nonprofit keep cool and maintain public goodwill in the midst of a crisis.

1. When crisis is apparent, stop and plan. Sit down with the primary decision-makers to develop a written and confidential response strategy. A crisis response plan should include:

- a. Information Flow: Who talks to whom, who should be included in key conversations, and who should be included in press release and other public response.
- b. Crisis Response Planning Team: This includes a core group of responders and a support or implementation group.
- c. Crisis Response Goals: The organization's goals may include maintaining community support, recovering lost cash flow, prosecuting criminal behavior, and implementing a plan to prevent future vulnerability .
- d. Talking Points: Script a formal response for the Spokesperson to use in interviews and press releases that outlines what to say, who to talk to, and when to defer a response or not answer questions. Provide a template response for other members of your organization along the lines of "Ms. X is our official spokesperson. You should direct all inquiries and comments to her."

2. Appoint a Spokesperson. Select a single person to represent your organization in a time of crisis. Look for these qualities when choosing a spokesperson:

- a. Credentials: Executive Director, Board Member, Board Officer, Attorney
- b. Knowledge: Thorough knowledge of the business practices and programs of the nonprofit, as well as a complete understanding of the crisis.

c. Honesty: Demeanor and presentation are critical. A Spokesperson should not demur or dissemble. Even a slight appearance of "hiding something" can damage the Nonprofit's image.

d. Composure: The Spokesperson is both the source of information to the public, and the target for negative comments and must be comfortable answering questions and accusations calmly and competently.

3. Tell the story.

- a. Tell it all: Don't hide information just because it's embarrassing or awkward. Don't divulge personal information, though.
- b. Tell it on the record: Don't indulge in private conversations except for a select few, which might include significant stakeholders. Never talk to the press outside of prepared statements.
- c. Tell it fast: Get your story told before the rumor mill starts.
- d. Tell them what you are doing about it: Have a plan to address and overcome the crisis. This will provide the public with confidence that the nonprofit can survive the crisis.

4. Get back to work. Name it, claim it, and move on. Don't dwell on the crisis; focus on recovery and resuming the nonprofit's mission. Discourage prolonged discussion, analysis, or gossip of the crisis by the public and stakeholders. Instead, gently but firmly redirect the conversation to what the nonprofit is doing now, and the progress and planning that will help the nonprofit recover.

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