

Coping with bad press

Most advice agencies enjoy a high level of public trust and the majority of media coverage is positive. But, however well managed an organisation is, it's not always possible to avoid a crisis, and organisations in the public eye may have to deal with negative publicity.

While it's not always possible to avoid a crisis altogether, following a few key principles can help you communicate about the situation effectively to protect both your reputation and the reputation of your wider network. It's about getting the right information out to the people who matter, such as clients, potential clients, funders, politicians and the media itself.

What is bad press?

Negative media coverage is anything which damages any facet of your reputation. It could undermine one or more of your network's key values, the agency's professionalism, or put off funders and potential clients.

Types of bad press could include:

- a story about how a drop in funding is putting the future survival of the agency at risk
- an unhappy client's claim that they received poor quality advice
- an unhappy former volunteer claiming they were badly treated by the agency management
- theft of sensitive data from a laptop.

But something going wrong doesn't automatically lead to bad press. Engaging early with the media can ensure you have an opportunity to manage the messages that you put out so that misinformation is limited. In any crisis situation it can help if you already have an established, positive relationship with your local media – so if you have a good story to share, make sure you share it! They may be more willing to consider your needs in a time of crisis, and you'll be safe in the knowledge that any slightly negative coverage is only a short lived blip in your otherwise positive record.

Be prepared

Communications strategy

As soon as a crisis occurs, or even better, whenever you think one might happen, you should plan a communications strategy. If the issue is one that could potentially risk the reputation of your wider network you should also contact the national Press Office as soon as possible (where appropriate) so they are in the loop and can advise you on any additional courses of action.

Your strategy should:

- be based on an honest assessment of the situation and the risks involved
- think about opposing views and alternative interpretations
- always consider the worst case scenario and address it
- take into account the impact on your staff, volunteers, funding, partners and your network as a whole.

It should also outline:

- what messages to convey, when, how and to whom
- who the nominated spokesperson is and how others should deal with any enquiries on the issue
- what information can be shared, and what needs to be kept confidential.

Holding statement

It is sensible as part of a crisis communications strategy to prepare a 'holding statement'. This is a short statement about the situation which is issued to media if they make an enquiry. It is rare that you would proactively highlight an issue to the media if they are not aware of it already. Effectively it does what it says on the tin, and is a statement which conveys the very bare bones of what can be said, until such a time as more information can be released – for example, if a court case is underway but no charges have been brought, or an investigation is being undertaken but no findings available yet. It should also outline whether further statements will be issued in due course.

Questions and Answers

A good way of clarifying a complex reputational issue, both for your own clarity and in light of any media questioning, is to prepare a series of Q&A's. Think about all the questions you might be asked about the circumstances – from the most basic, to those horrid worst-case-scenario tricky questions – and formulate concise, easy to relay answers for each one, which present the situation in the best light possible. Type them out and save them alongside your holding statement. They should also be shared with anyone else involved in the management of the issues.

For example think about:

- Who (is to blame?)
- What (happened?)
- Why (this information was leaked and not published by you first?)
- Where (other information can be found?)
- When (will there be a resolution?)
- What (if things had been done differently)
- Will (it happen again? And how will this be prevented next time?)

What to do when a journalist calls

There's a potential crisis looming, you've hopefully had time to prepare a strategy and tactics as well as anticipate potential questions, and a journalist calls up asking about the issue. What do you do?

- 1) First of all DON'T PANIC or be pushed into responding to anything straight away.
- 2) Find out from them how much they know and what they are asking and, if you need to, buy yourself some time by telling them you'll call them back later so you can prepare yourself.
- 3) Remember there are two sides to every story and they have a duty to show balance (although it's likely they will approach the story from the point of view of the person who approached them first).
- 4) Beware! As soon as you are talking to a journalist you are 'on the record'. Don't be persuaded to talk off the record in a crisis situation.
- 5) Try not to respond with 'no comment' (this is where Q&A's come in handy). It can look defensive.
- 6) Correct any inaccuracies in the information they have.
- 7) Add any further information which may be beneficial (perhaps issue them with the holding statement).
- 8) Be personal and cooperative, rather than defensive – they're not scrutinising you personally.

If in doubt talk to your national Press Office where appropriate! They're can help, and its imperative they know about any potentially damaging reputational issues.

