

get it right on... **Handling a Media Crisis!**

There are some certainties in life – death, taxes and accidents! There are any number of screw-ups and embarrassments which can befall a voluntary organisation – some home grown and some arising out of situations beyond your control. When news of such an occurrence breaks, voluntary organisations often find themselves having to deal with media enquiries. What you want to avoid at all costs is this flurry turning into a full-blown media crisis that can cause long-term damage to your group and a loss of public confidence.

Whatever has happened– accident, screw-up or controversy – your first priority must be to fix it and to ensure there is no continuing danger or risk to the public or any chance of the same thing happening again. Your second priority should be to ensure that any media you receive does not cause any long-term damage or loss of confidence in the group.

Prepare for the crisis

Every organisation should have a risk management strategy. It is also a good idea for voluntary organisations to have a "Crisis Communications Strategy", ensuring senior staff and volunteers, directors and Board members know exactly what should happen should your group be faced with a media crisis.

This plan will ensure that your group has:

- An appointed spokesperson/s.
- A process where everyone in the organisation knows who to call should a major incident or crisis occur.
- An established process where senior staff or directors can gather as much accurate information as quickly as possible.
- A process which allows accurate information to be provided to the media as soon as practicable.

So what happens when the media comes calling about something that has gone wrong, and it involves your group?

Don't ignore it – it won't go away!

It's vital that you don't try to ignore the things that are happening. The longer it takes you to start to deal with the situation, the more everyone will believe you have something to hide. It is also unlikely that you will be able to stop the media running a story – your aim should be to make sure that as far as possible the nature of that story is accurate and fair. Remember you can't complain about not having your side of the story represented if you don't produce it!

8 Top Tips

- **Decide what the crisis is.** Recognise early that you do actually have a crisis on your hands, then you can start to work on it. Think through why the media are asking details – who will be interested in your response. Write your replies for them.
- **Have a spokesperson.** The highest-ranking person (chair or senior staff member) is likely to have the authority and access to information to be able to act as your spokesperson. Make sure that your spokesperson is able to release as much information as they can as quickly as they can. Don't save everything up for a later statement. Responding quickly will show that you are acting in a sincere, honest and reliable manner.
- **Avoid being too defensive.** "I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, you can't prove a thing" will not work – no matter how much you want it to. If you don't know the answer, don't guess at it. Be honest and stick to only confirmed information you know to be accurate and correct. If necessary, say that you don't know but will check it out and get back to them. But remember to get back to them!
- **First impressions count.** Try to get past any preconceived ideas people may have of you by being openness and committed to resolving the issue.
- **Remember the law!** If there are legal, be get advice on what you can say. You have to publicly address the issue, it is only the manner or amount of information that is up for discussion. "No comment" is not likely to be effective so stick to phrases such as "I can't provide that information until I have all the details ..." or "I can't answer that until I have a full report" or "I am happy to try to answer those questions once I have spoken to the right people ..."
- **Don't answer hypothetical questions.** Stick to the facts. Be prepared to say "I can't speculate on that" or "I would prefer not to deal in hypotheticals. What we do know at this time is" However, don't leave wrong 'facts' unchallenged. Let people know if something is wrong – don't let it become common knowledge but resist any urge to blame the press!
- **Show concern in your answers.** As a voluntary organisation, your main mission is to support the community in some way, so be aware that you are likely to be dealing with concerns as well as the issues.
- **Use easily understood language.** Try to keep jargon to a minimum and speak in a manner that allows people to understand the message you are trying to convey.

West Dunbartonshire CVS produces a range of resources covering different issues of interest to community and voluntary organisations.
Please contact us directly if you would like one-to-one support or advice on any issue.