

Stockpiling Ammunition for Crisis Response

By Rosanne Desmone

The more you plan for crisis mode, the less scrambling you'll have to do the next time your association is struck by controversy, scandal, crime, or accident. Below are examples of the kind of information you should prepare so you'll have it at your fingertips when you need it most.

1. **General organizational information.** If a crisis shines an unexpected spotlight on your association, you need to provide the media with information so they know who you are and what you do. This could include an organizational fact sheet, annual report, membership overview and mission statement.

If you don't have this material already, prepare something—even a one-page summary is better than nothing—and be sure to keep this information up to date. Have it available in the press section of your Web site as well as in a form you can easily fax, e-mail, or hand out. Generally the media will use the information you provide; if you provide nothing, they will find other sources—maybe even your competition.

2. **Specific organizational information.** Once you have your organizational fact sheet, prepare one for relevant subgroups. This could include your foundation, for-profit subsidiary, and/or high-profile chapters. Keep it simple. Just tell what each does, where they are, who's in charge, and any other information that will be useful for explaining yourself to reporters who may know nothing about you.
3. **Resources to help with potential crisis situations.** Meet with key people in the association to develop a list of the most likely crises that might occur; once you get people thinking, you'll create a list easily. Possibilities include financial or tax scandals; natural disasters, accidents that could result in injury, or terrorist attacks; employee misdeeds; and problems specific to your association's field or location. In reality, lesser incidents that aren't handled immediately also can become crises (or at least unfavorable headlines): protesters at your annual meeting, a pick-pocket at the conference hotel, or food poisoning at the keynote lunch. It's often these sorts of everyday occurrences that can do you in.

Next collect any information available—reports, clippings, internal actions, minutes of meetings—and create a file for each potential crisis you identify. Include whatever might later help you discuss what happened, why it happened, and what protections or preventive measures were in place to keep it from happening. If similar incidents occurred in the past, have available all information on what was done to correct the problem. Again, keep these files current.

4. **Key messages.** For each potential crisis you identify, develop three key messages that you will include in all communications about the crisis. These depend on the situation but should convey, at a minimum:
 - your association's concern and sympathy about what happened;
 - that you had procedures in place to prevent the situation from happening; and
 - that you are taking all possible actions to resolve the crisis.

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- 5. FAQ list.** It's pretty easy to figure out what questions the media will have about certain crisis situations. Take advantage of their predictability and develop for each potential crisis a list of frequently asked questions (and answers) that you can have at hand in case something happens. With this list at the ready, you'll just have to update it with currently relevant Q&A as the situation unfolds.

For example, if you are in the meat industry when a finding of mad cow disease occurs, you'll need to be prepared to answer questions about (1) what exactly mad cow disease is; (2) whether the entire beef supply is at risk; and (3) what the industry is doing to contain this outbreak and prevent future occurrences. You could easily come up with a more extensive list of potential questions, and it would be a good idea to do so—with answers, of course.

Although these generic items will help get you through a crisis, you'll likely think of other things to include in your crisis response arsenal that are specific to your business or industry. The important thing is to take action today to have the help you need at hand if a crisis hits tomorrow.

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