

WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS

A WEISWOOD STRATEGIES WHITEPAPER



TACTICS FOR
RESPONDING TO THE
PRESS DURING A CRISIS



A crisis can happen at any time of day, which means that media inquiries can happen any time of day.

Will you be prepared when your city's major newspaper or TV station, or a national media outlet calls or emails?

We offer seven steps that will help you effectively navigate the media during a crisis situation and manage your organization's reputation.

1. DETERMINE THE DEADLINE

Always inquire about a reporter's deadline — especially if they do not mention it in the request. News media is fast paced, and deadlines can be as short as one hour.

If you determine that responding to a media inquiry is in your best interest (see #4 below), it is vitally important that you meet the media's deadline. This ensures that your statement on the situation will be included in the first airing or first edition of the news. If not, you may have missed your ONE opportunity to include your company's response to a crisis.

2. GET THE FACTS STRAIGHT

As soon as a member of the media contacts you or someone in your organization, start gathering facts so that you have the most accurate picture of the situation as possible.

Before you respond, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What happened?
2. Where did it happen?
3. When did it happen?
4. Is the situation under control? If not, are plans underway to get it under control?

And, depending on the situation:

5. Was anyone injured? (Never share names of the injured to the press!)
6. If yes, who responded to the incident (e.g., police, fire, EMS)?

Situations are often fluid, so establishing a concrete list of facts is essential.

3. WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

Quickly think about who in your organization needs to be aware that your brand or organization will be mentioned (possibly unflatteringly) in the press.

This list will vary by organization and by the situation, but it almost always includes the following:

- Your supervisor
- CEO or president of the organization
- Legal counsel (may be external to the organization)
- Head of communications or PR

Usually, this core group should be involved in all steps of the decision-making process and should review anything that is sent to the press. Letting any of the above individuals be surprised that their organization is in the news is a receipt for disaster.

4. DECIDE TO RESPOND... OR NOT

Now that you have gathered the facts, have informed all relevant parties, and know the deadline, it's time to figure out how (or if) to respond to the media request.

It is important to note that while it is generally best to be as accommodating as possible, you are under no obligation to meet every request from the media. Do what is best for your organization, even if that means not responding.

Reporters will often shoot for the moon, including requests to speak in person or even interview your CEO / President, sometimes during on-going situations.

Generally (but not always), in a crisis moment when facts can be still fluid, it is best to provide some kind of written statement as opposed to a phone interview or sit-down interview with your CEO or president.

Note: Certain large-scale crisis events may require a press conference, but this is often handled by, or in coordination with, the emergency responders.

5. SETTLE ON ONE SPOKESPERSON

To avoid confusion and ensure consistency, all media requests should be directed to one person. Additionally, written statements on the situation should be attributed to one person – often the leader of the organization – even if they are not the person who actually crafts the response.

Communicate this rule to ALL employees in your organization. Reporters on deadline will often search for anyone they can talk with – from CEOs to interns – and use that in their stories. It is vital that all media requests are funneled to a designated spokesperson to ensure consistency of message.

6. CRAFT AND SEND THE RESPONSE

Whether responding by email or by phone, best practices to follow include:

- Stick to the known facts
- NEVER speculate on the situation or what may follow and or who is at fault
- For written statements, lead with (or at least mention) the values of your organization
- Avoid using the term “no comment”
- Show empathy and compassion when warranted
- Avoid sounding defensive

Depending the situation, it may make sense to post your written statement to your company’s website and social media platforms. You can then direct future press inquiries to this online statement.

7. CORRECT THE RECORD

When the story hits the news, check for factual errors. If you find any, the designated spokesperson should contact the editors and reporters with the errors and ask for a correction to be made as soon as possible. Multiple requests may be needed to ensure this happens, but it is VITAL.

It's also important for someone to monitor social media for wild and incorrect rumors. Responding to each person may be impossible and counterproductive, but as long as your statement is somewhere online, you can point to individuals to the correct set of facts.

ABOUT WEISWOOD STRATEGIES

Weiswood Strategies is a boutique consulting firm that serves nonprofits, businesses, and individuals. We specialize in: brand clarification, customized marketing strategies and execution, media placements, fundraising communications, and personal branding in the form of creative resumes and compelling LinkedIn profiles.

Weiswood is a mashup of “weiss” (the German word for “white”) and the English word “wood.” White wood calls to mind aspen trees, which have a network of roots that support the sustainability and growth of the trees above, keeping the interconnected grove healthy and thriving. Similarly, our goal is to support your sustainability and growth.



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