

Dealing with the press: top ten tips for legacy officers

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A legacy officer's role can involve difficult disputes with families and strong emotions can be aroused. In such disputes intrinsic human interest – and the risk of accompanying media interest – is always there. If your charity is ill-prepared, handles the press badly, or fails to take action after the event, it can leave your brand severely damaged. Follow these ten tips *before*, *during* and *after* being contacted by the Press to ensure your charity isn't the one caught out.

Before the Press contact you...

1. *Monitor the internet either through your Press team or by setting up 'Google' alerts* (www.google.co.uk/alerts). Damaging stories often begin on social media or in local or online newspapers. Having notice of such stories from the outset means that you have a chance to nip them in the bud.
2. *Prepare for media interest by asking yourself the difficult questions in advance.* If media interest seems likely or even only possible, take action straightaway by drafting a reactive press statement and a 'Question & Answer' ('Q&A') sheet, in which you anticipate every tricky question you can think of. By doing this work in advance, when a journalist does contact you your explanation can be conveyed quickly and cogently.
3. *Brief your directors and trustees to ensure they are 'on message'.* Often journalists will make their first enquiries to senior management who may blurt out that they are 'outraged' by the allegations or deny them outright when in fact the position is more nuanced. If everyone appreciates the risk of negative publicity and is aware of what the circumstances are, a unified and effective response to the media is more likely. Send your management the Q&A sheet you have prepared (see 2 above).

During a media crisis...

4. *Do not* give full answers to a journalist if you receive a call out of the blue. You are likely to be wrong-footed and your words misconstrued. If you are surprised by a call, note the journalist's name, contact details and the print deadline, and agree an e-mailed response in due course.
5. *Do not* resort to 'no comment' without thinking. This may well be interpreted as the charity having something to hide and reported as 'refused to comment', which may imply guilt.
6. *Do not* simply ignore any contact from a journalist. Once your charity has been given a reasonable opportunity to comment, under English defamation law a damaging story may be published without that step necessarily constituting defamation.

After a story has been published...

7. *Consider requesting removal of incorrect information and asking for corrections or an apology.* If your charity has been unfairly criticised or defamed, speak up rather than letting the damaging allegations percolate. Failing to do so will mean that when your charity is searched for on the web, the inaccurate and damaging story will be there for all to see. Contact the relevant publication's editor or legal team to convey your request.
8. *Report* any event that is likely to have a significant impact on a charity's reputation to the Charity Commission (see '[Reporting Serious Incidents – Guidance for Trustees](#)', December 2012)
9. *Consider a complaint to a media regulator.* IPSO replaces the widely derided PCC, but still has to prove its independence and worth to the public. Nevertheless, it may be worth mounting a complaint given that such a step is free and should be relatively quick.
10. *Consider a legal complaint.* Although taking this step may not be attractive for a charity, sometimes the damage is so serious that a legal complaint is called for, with a view to having the allegations withdrawn and compensated for with damages and the payment of legal costs. A last resort, but one worth considering.