

SO, YOU'VE GOT A PROBLEM!

What to Do When Public Relations Goes Bad

By Karen Friedman

So, you've got a problem! Protestors, who claim you are treating employees unfairly, are picketing outside your office. The phone won't stop ringing and that annoying reporter from Action News just showed up at your front door with a camera. What do you do?

- a. Don't answer the door and hope that Dan goes away.
- b. Tell Dan the protestors have no basis and their claims are ridiculous.
- c. Immediately call a news conference to tell your side of the story.
- d. Refuse to take any calls.
- e. Wait until things calm down.
- f. None of the above.

If you answered none of the above, you're off to a good start because you understand that even if Dan does go away, the story is likely to stay. Furthermore, by not answering the door or ignoring phone calls, you might call even more attention to your problem and help create an even bigger story. So, back to the question: what do you do and why?

First of all, realize that your agenda is not necessarily compatible with the media's agenda. The media is looking for "great stuff." That means good visuals, gripping interviews and compelling facts that can be broken down into stories you'll want to read or watch.

Secondly, the reporter needs you, the accused, to tell the whole story and to tell it accurately. If you don't cooperate, the reporter can't report your side of the story. Does that mean he'll go away? The answer is no. He has been assigned the story and he must deliver, with or without you. He will interview protestors, former employees, people who don't like you or anyone else that can offer a perspective. Bad for business? You bet! But, that is not the reporter's concern. He doesn't work for you. The reporter's job is to tell that story with or without you. By not dealing with the story swiftly and effectively, you are allowing others to tell it for you. You have opened the door to speculation, interpretation, hearsay and reports of "no comment" on your part, which makes you look guilty even if you're not.

This is not to say you should run right out and give interviews. If you are not prepared and mis-speak, you can't take it back. The damage could be catastrophic. So preparation is key. Know your facts, anticipate questions, prepare message points and select the appropriate spokesperson. However, countering bad publicity does not have to be adversarial. If handled correctly, you can turn your problem into a win-win situation for everyone. The reporter wins if he gets the story. You win if you get your message out and the public wins by learning both sides of the story.

Because reporters face such strict deadlines, when a crisis erupts, they need information quickly. You will dramatically improve your relationship and credibility with the media if you work with them and let them know that you understand their limitations.

Be Accessible

Be open, available and willing to respond.

Be Honest

Honesty is still the best policy. Be truthful and back that truth up with facts. If you are at fault, say so and apologize. Then, explain how you will fix the problem.

Be Responsive

Realize that any concern or question is legitimate and should be addressed. Get back to the reporter as quickly as possible even to say you're not prepared to make a statement just yet. Try to provide a time when information will be available so you can help the reporter meet their deadlines.

Show Empathy

Don't act arrogant. Stay calm and try to understand the other points of view. Be as understanding as possible. Show concern.

Be Consistent

Speak with one voice. Make sure all spokespeople are saying the same thing. Your message should be direct and consistent regardless of the audience.

Employees

Reporters often get their best “sound bites” from angry, uninformed employees who sometimes feel left out. Keep your employees informed. Minimize the rumors.

Speak Clearly

Speak plain simple English that is easy to understand. Don't use big words and don't be a bureaucrat. Remember that you are talking to people about people. Stories are about people.

It is easy to blame your problems on the media, but you should understand that how your company responds to an issue is what often drives the media. While you can't always prevent something from happening, you can minimize the impact by responding quickly and effectively. Let me give you an example.

During a summer baseball season a few years back, Burt and Ernie of Sesame Street were visiting the fans at the old Veteran's Stadium in Philadelphia. Burt got into an argument and slugged a fan. Unfortunately for Burt, a fan with a camcorder caught it on tape and dropped the tape off at a local television station. At first, newsroom personnel chuckled when they watched the tape. They discussed running about 15 seconds of it before sports. No one thought it was a big deal. No one, that is, until Burt's public relations person phoned the station and pleaded with management not to air the tape. All of a sudden, this unimportant 15-second story got bigger and bigger. After all, it must be a big deal if the public relations person was so worried! Maybe we've underestimated the interest of our viewers, said management! Based on that phone call, a series of no comments at the stadium and the fact that our newsroom had pictures to tell the story, it was assigned to a reporter: me! What began as a few frames of video buried toward the end of the newscast, ended up being the lead story on the 6:00 news that night. It's the type of story people talk about around the dinner table. It's the type of story people tune in to watch.

That is not to say you should not call a newsroom if you think information should be corrected or clarified. Newsrooms want to be accurate and will make corrections, but it is important to think about the consequences of your actions and have a game plan before you pick up the phone. Don't put yourself in a defensive position. If you plan to contact the media, make the best use of the media. Make sure there is something in it for you.

While you can't control the angle of a story, you can control information if you are direct, honest and accessible. I believe perception is reality. Because

companies are often surprised, angry, scared, or don't have all the answers when a story surfaces, they often fail to acknowledge that there is a problem and they don't always realize that due to fierce competition, the media will not wait to report the story. Therefore, public perceptions are formed very early. By acknowledging there is a problem, telling the media you will address that problem, and showing concern for anyone affected by the problem, you will have much greater control over public perception.

Most reporters take their jobs very seriously. They need accurate up to date information and the ability to access it as quickly as possible. So, the next time you have a problem, take control by controlling the flow of information and remember, every interview should be an opportunity for you to deliver a message. Make sure it's your message!