

How to deal with a media crisis

This information was written as part of the funded marketing advice service for voluntary and community groups in Bradford District funded by NRF and CBMDC.

10 steps to handling negative publicity

Most organisations face problems at one time or another. Sometimes, these difficulties make it into the local, or even national press. Here are some suggestions on how to cope:

- 1. Prevention is better than cure** – do you have a complaints policy? Do you regularly get feedback from volunteers and users? Have you got robust financial reporting systems in place? Make sure that small problems don't get out of hand by investigating allegations or suspicions as quickly as possible. Keeping a written record of what action was taken and why, is essential – but keep the records confidential.
- 2. Spokesperson** – appointing a senior member of staff or management committee member to speak on behalf of your group gives a professional and consistent voice in times of crisis.
- 3. Respond quickly** – if a journalist rings, never say “no comment”. Simply ask to ring back, check the journalists' deadline and confirm you'll meet it. Write a simple response (see 4.) and get it approved by your spokesperson before making it public.
- 4. Holding statement** – write a short statement based on the following format 1) show sympathy with anyone adversely affected 2) explain what you are doing to tackle the situation e.g. cooperate with an enquiry.
- 5. Make sure you inform everyone** – your management committee members, staff, volunteers, stakeholders, partners, relevant funders and users should all be told first by you, rather than the media.
- 6. Keep up the communication** - use your website, email networks, newsletter and face-to-face contact to reassure your users and stakeholders that you are taking the issue seriously and let them know whether there are any changes to your services or not.
- 7. Investigate** – this could mean setting up your own enquiry or cooperating with an external investigation (e.g. police). Make sure staff are supported through this difficult time.
- 8. Learn from others** – publications such as Third Sector or the Guardian will give you real examples of where groups of all sizes have had to confront a difficult media situation. For further reading take a look at an in-depth article from NCVO's VS Magazine August 2007
<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/vsmagazine/features/?id=5938>

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9. Agree a policy – a short policy and guidelines on handling the media is a good start, just in case! Further help is available from bfunded. Contact Sarah at KVS on 01535 665258.

10. Train and support your staff/ volunteers – Basic information on communicating with the media should form part of staff/ volunteer/ committee member induction. Fact-sheets are available online from bfunded:

http://www.bfunded.org.uk/help_and_advice/preparation/marketing/

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