

Dealing with the media

All voluntary organisations should cultivate good contacts with their local media. Regular mentions of what you are doing in the local paper or on local radio will help keep your organisation in the public mind, which can prove invaluable when it comes to fundraising or attracting volunteers. Trumpet your success stories and keep the cuttings to back up future funding applications.

Obviously you would like all your appearances in the media to be in the "good news" column. Life being what it is, however, sooner or later you will find yourself having to deal with a controversial issue, rebut a damaging allegation or defend an unpopular course of action. This is why it is so important to have a written media policy.

A media policy should lay down who in the organisation talks to the media, the procedure for agreeing press statements and make it clear that non-compliance with the policy is a disciplinary offence. Disciplinary action should be taken particularly if information disclosed is misleading, inaccurate, malicious or in breach of the confidentiality policy and results in damage to the organisation, its staff or clients. This is notwithstanding the recent legislation aimed at protecting legitimate "whistleblowers" from going public with potentially damaging revelations. But if you've nothing to hide, then you've nothing to worry about, have you?



Any contact with the media, whether by staff or trustees, should be reported to a named person or post within the organisation before giving a statement. Some organisations may prefer to have all contact channelled through this person, for example a press officer or chief executive. A larger organisation may even have a media sub-committee which deals with all aspects of publicity and the media. Make sure everyone in the organisation is aware of the correct procedure.

Issues of organisational or client confidentiality may be involved so always check with the named person or post mentioned above if you are unsure. Refer to

the organisation's confidentiality policy to see whether any information requested could be seen to breach this. Organisations dealing with vulnerable people or victims of abuse should be aware that even if a person's name is withheld, it may be possible to work out that person's identity or whereabouts from other clues given in an article.

If asked out of the blue to give the organisation's view on something, promise to get back to the journalist concerned, agree a statement with other senior staff or trustees and get back to the journalist as quickly as possible. Follow up any verbal contact with a faxed or e-mailed press release confirming what you said (or thought you said!) in writing, to avoid misquotation. Remember that journalists have deadlines to meet, usually within a couple of hours of phoning you – it's no use saying someone will get back to them in a day or two – the story will be dead and buried by then.

Press releases should always be issued in the name of the organisation, giving a named contact, who is likely to be available to discuss the story at the time the press release is received by the media organisation. They should always include a quote from a named person which gets across the message the organisation wants to promote. Always include a photo-opportunity if this is relevant.

If you really can't get an agreed statement in time, perhaps because several senior people are on holiday, tell the journalist you're very sorry but the organisation can't comment on this issue and would prefer not to be mentioned. Try and make it up to them by suggesting other people they could speak to or by promising a "good news" story in the next couple of weeks, so they keep you on their list of contacts. Remember, journalists have a job to do and will appreciate any help you can give them to make it easier. Having a few stories "in the bank" helps them to spend more time looking for that elusive big "scoop" which they dream will one day get them a job with a national paper!

Never represent your own views as being those of the organisation. If you are contacted in your capacity as

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a staff member or trustee it is safer not to venture your personal opinion, as it usually gets shortened at the sub-editing stage and the final result is "Fred Bloggs of (Organisation) said...", clearly implying that this is the organisation's official line on the matter. Forget about "off the record" briefings –they're for politicians. Never tell a journalist anything you wouldn't want reported.

If you are seriously misquoted, in a way that could damage the image of the organisation, contact the editor or producer concerned, followed up by a written statement and insist on a correction at the earliest opportunity. Don't get angry. Make it clear firmly but politely that this was not what was said and you would like to correct the misleading impression given. Again good personal contacts pay dividends.

If you find yourself in a situation where the organisation is coming in for some serious criticism in the local media, tackle it immediately before lasting damage is done. Get the facts in the public domain as soon as possible and let the public make up its own mind. This is where good personal contacts with local reporters pay off and you can call in a few favours to prevent a potentially disastrous loss of public support. Don't think you can just ignore bad publicity – people always remember the bad news rather than the good!

"Hold the front page while we have a committee meeting and we'll get back to you."

If asked to appear on radio or television, obtain as much detail in advance as to the nature of the interview, the questions likely to be asked and who else will be invited onto the programme. Discuss the line to take with other senior staff or trustees. Stick to your prepared brief and don't get bounced into off-the-cuff answers to questions you hadn't agreed to discuss, particularly if the programme is going out live. While some local radio or TV reporters fancy themselves as a successor to Jeremy Paxman, it is unlikely that they're really going to savage you over some minor local issue! Just keep calm and get the organisation's point across. An interviewer will quickly move on if you make it clear you are not going to respond to a particular line of questioning or get drawn into a slanging match with another guest.

Which brings us to our final point - don't be frightened of the media – it can be a powerful marketing tool for your organisation if used correctly. In most cases, all that local journalists are looking for is a good human interest story. It is quite rare that local voluntary organisations get embroiled in controversy and when it does happen, it's usually because the organisation failed to heed a few basic guidelines about managing its publicity properly.

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