

# **10 STEP PLAN FOR EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

An outline guide for charity executives and trustees on how to survive intense media pressure during a crisis



Produced by The Counsel House and the  
TCH Round Table crisis management team

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# HANDLING THE MEDIA IN A CRISIS

## How would you cope if suddenly caught in the media spotlight?

What happens when a disaster strikes and you and your organisation are thrown into the media spotlight because of some unforeseen crisis?

Charities caught in the media frenzy as a bad news story breaks will suddenly have to face up to intense media scrutiny. In this situation, there can be no time for self pity. Your role will be to defend the reputation of your organisation. To succeed, you will need to be calm, dispassionate and in control at all times, regardless of the intensity of the pressure.

Listed below are ten guiding principles that we believe will help you survive the media spotlight whilst handling a major news story.

## 1. BE PREPARED

It sounds obvious, but the key to success in any crisis management campaign is preparation. Before anything does go wrong, it would be wise to undertake a review of your organisation and identify what might go wrong.

Work out a 'crisis plan' and identify the spokespeople who you think will best protect the organisation's reputation during such a crisis – i.e. your crisis management team. In this way, when disaster strikes, you will have the confidence of knowing what steps you need to take first and who will take them.

It is good practice to put the plan in writing. However, the plan should not be too rigid, too specific or too long. During a crisis, you won't have long to read it so you will be grateful for a plan that offers flexibility, clarity and brevity.

A single laminated sheet outlining the key steps that need to be taken will be much more useful than a large ring-binder full of instructions. This sheet should list a directory of key contact numbers (home and mobiles) for each member of the crisis management team and the contact numbers of journalists considered most important to your organisation. Supporting this should be a key fact sheet about your organisation, including any information which will help advocate your case such as the positive track record and the contribution your organisation had made to date.

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## 2. AT THE EARLIEST OPPORTUNITY, START TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE

If suddenly thrown into the media spotlight, try to ascertain the facts of the story as best you can before making any public statements, but be prepared to respond to media enquires at the earliest opportunity.

Spend a little time on your own, or in the counsel of your crisis management team, reflecting on what the media may be able to expose about your organisation. Think through and begin to articulate the arguments you will use to defend your position before answering any questions from the media.

However, this pause for thought is not a licence to hide from the media. If you are not prepared to speak to the media and inform the public from your perspective you will be judged guilty. "No comment" is like a red rag to a bull and it gives the media a free hand to speculate on what the truth might be.

Set yourself the objective of turning disaster into opportunity. The aim should be that your organisation will be better placed once the disaster is over than it was before it occurred.

The first priority will be to draft short 'holding statements' which outline, briefly and factually, your side of the story as you are able to present it at the time of the story unfolding. Provide facts, not opinions.

These can be given verbally to the media in response to any questions until such time as you have a clearer view of the facts. Develop and flesh out these holding statements as and when you have more information to give to the media.

As your knowledge of the facts develops and as your confidence grows, you can begin to consider developing these holding statements into published press statements or you can even think of arranging organised press briefings depending on the nature and the urgency of the story.

At all times be driven by the principles that all your communication should be:

- honest and factually true (there is no need to speculate, so don't)
- empathetic and compassionate in tone
- as open, candid and as accessible as can be reasonably expected
- as timely and responsive to requests from journalists for information as can be reasonably expected.

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### 3. DEVELOP A SYMPATHETIC PUBLIC PERSONA, BUT DON'T FEEL PUSHED INTO THE NEED TO APOLOGISE OR ADMIT GUILT

It is only human nature for people who are put under pressure to appear defensive when questioned by journalists about a crisis story.

However, when caught in the media spotlight, it is important to try and present a public persona which comes across as calm, likeable, sympathetic and authoritative.

You and your organisation will be judged by the media and public alike by your ability to perform under pressure.

If the implication of the story is that there are 'victims' of your organisation's actions, appear sympathetic to their plight. However, it is important to avoid volunteering or accepting liability or blame even if pressurised to do so.

### 4. SEIZE THE INITIATIVE AND SET YOUR OWN AGENDA

In communications terms, be prepared to seize early initiatives by rapidly establishing your organisation as a reliable and credible source of information.

If something has gone wrong, make it clear what steps your organisation is taking to remedy the situation.

Arm yourself with the facts and figures that will help you advocate your cause in the most convincing way possible and try to 'set the agenda' for the way media coverage develops around the story.

Try to proactive, rather than just reactive, to the way the story is unfolding.

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## 5. MAKE THE MEDIA YOUR ALLY NOT YOUR ENEMY

Whenever possible, look for ways of using the media as a platform for advocating your cause and a means of containing the impact of the crisis.

Never fall into the trap of antagonising the media or getting into scraps with journalists.

In a public battle between an individual organisation and the national media, rest assured there can only be one winner. It won't be you.

Avoid the temptation of cajoling the media with the threat of legal action as a means of suppressing the story unless you are very sure of your ground. They have very expensive lawyers who know the laws of libel and defamation backwards.

## 6. CREATE EFFECTIVE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

At the outset of a crisis, quickly establish a control centre manned by your crisis management team and PR experts from which you can plan and mount your defence against the media onslaught.

Set up telephone hotlines to cope with the floods of additional incoming calls that will be received during a crisis. As the media effectively works to deadlines outside of office hours and at weekends, try to make sure that calls can be taken at all times. Try to avoid media enquiries falling onto the stony ground of voice messaging and mobile voicemails.

Remember, if the media can't get hold of you, then they will turn elsewhere for comment and opinion on issues concerning you and your organisation.

Make use of your organisation's website as a key weapon in the communications armoury. It can be your 'front page' where key real-time messages can be delivered to both the public and the media alike, dampening down the need for telephone enquiries as you issue up-to-the-minute news and information.

Remember also that the media is sympathetic to people and organisations under pressure. When handling major news stories where journalists can see that access to information, people and even places is going to be difficult, look to make use of pooling, press accreditation and other systems as a means of controlling the number of journalists who you need to talk to deliver the story. Call on a professional PR consultant with crisis management experience to help you with this process.

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## 7. KNOW YOUR TARGET AUDIENCES

Surviving the media spotlight requires a cool head and an ability to remain focused under pressure.

It is also important to 'keep the eye on the ball', ensuring that you do not let the media spotlight disrupt the functioning of your organisation too much, whilst remembering to communicate directly with the key target audiences upon whom the future of the organisation depends, be they trustees, donors, volunteers and supporters.

There is no point running a successful crisis management and media relations campaign if you have forgotten to communicate with the key audiences which matter most to your organisation.

## 8. FRONT UP YOUR OWN DEFENCE

Should the media spotlight fall on you, don't be seen to shy away from its intensity or, worse still, don't give the impression that others in your own organisation, especially junior employees, have been given the task of publicly defending you to the media.

If you are evasive and appear to hide behind others, you will lose public sympathy and antagonise the media investigating your story. If you are big, bold, brave and co-operative, that is how you will appear to the public and you will draw the media into being more sympathetic to your cause.

## 9. FIND OBJECTIVE AND AUTHORITATIVE ALLIES

Under intense media pressure, you are likely to feel under siege and all alone. However, there may well be allies you can turn to who can help to defend your position. The key advantage that external allies may bring to your cause is objectivity.

For example, industry data supplied by a trade association on information such as past performance, safety records, etc. will be much more persuasive than information originated by your own organisation. Find such information and use it.

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## 10. DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

Finally, don't reinvent the wheel. Look at how others have performed in the media spotlight in the past. Copy the techniques of those you think have performed well and avoid the mistakes of those you think have fared badly.

After all, we are all members of the public and make judgements about people from what we read in the media, just as the general public will judge you.

Consequently, ask your PR consultants or colleagues if they have acted for others in the media spotlight before. How did they fare, what lessons did they learn? Get them to justify the approach they would take and explain how they think they can turn what appears to be disaster into opportunity, both for you and your organisation.

### AFTER THE STORM

Finally, when the dust has settled and the media interest has died down, relax, unwind and remember:

1. your crisis management team: take them out for drink or some lunch by way of a thank you, whatever you think they deserve from you in acknowledgement of their hard work and to encourage the continuation of the camaraderie associated with working under pressure
2. trustees, donors, volunteers and supporters: get back in touch to tell them about future plans and, if appropriate, thank them for their support
3. you, your colleagues, and your organisation: Document briefly your experiences so that they can be used to help others in the future when it is their turn to be caught in the media spotlight.

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## What is TCH Round Table?

TCH Round Table is a new concept in the corporate communications and PR industry. It provides senior management, both in-house and in agencies, with access to a team of some of the UK's most experienced independent consultants.

Clients can select the relevant members from this team and obtain hands-on support and independent, objective advice as and when they need it. There will be no retainer fees and no long-term obligations.

All the members of the TCH Round Table team have previously operated at the highest management levels, both in-house and in the consultancy sector.

TCH Round Table offers a range of services to corporate and agency clients including:

- Brainstorming and PR problem-solving clinics
- PR reviews and audits
- Strategy and plan development
- Issues and crisis management
- Corporate development support
- PR masterclasses and training programmes
- Senior level interim management.



Round Table

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## The TCH Round Table crisis management team



The TCH Round Table crisis management team is led by Robin Swinbank, a founding partner in The Counsel House and one of the UK's most experienced interim PR managers. He has taken on a number of troubleshooting assignments for corporations like Eurotunnel, Logica, and Vickers plc. He has also advised a number of voluntary sector clients on PR and crisis management issues.