

“Adversity attracts the man of character. He seeks out the bitter joy of responsibility.”

Charles de Gaulle
(1890–1970) French statesman, first president of Fifth Republic

Last month I outlined some suggestions on dealing with the media in a special interest opportunity or during an interview. This month I would like to offer some thoughts on “crisis management” when dealing with the media and how to avoid creating disaster when trouble strikes...

Dealing with the Media in a Crisis

You may have been in business for decades and it has never happened to you. You may have been in business for weeks and been subject to it. You hope it never happens. But imagine that a parent accuses your gym of causing injury to their child or an employee sues for personal injury arising out of a disciplinary action. Handling these events will be difficult enough. Add the dimension of dealing with the media, and your task becomes even more challenging. Whether or not you like the idea of contending with reporters, cameras, and microphones, you may need to. Having a "media strategy" in mind before a crisis will help you.

Reporters are trained and educated in their field just as you are in your profession. Accept their right to ask questions to keep the public informed. If you provide a reporter with background information and answer questions clearly and truthfully, the reporter will make every effort to be fair. Tough questions don't trip people up. Sloppy answers to easy questions are what do people in. Be aware, however, that even the most effective media relations plan won't always result in favorable press. Expect to be on the receiving end of criticism occasionally. Nothing is 100 percent off the record. "I don't know, but I will find out and get back to you before your deadline" is an infinitely better thing to say to a reporter than making up facts that don't turn out to be true. Notes are made and reviewed by editors, publishers and lawyers.

Contact Your Insurer

The first step in any crisis is to report the incident to your insurance agent immediately, no matter the severity of the claim. If the claim has the potential to catch the media's attention, it's important that you have early contact with your insurance company.

While contacting your agent and / or insurance company is the ideal first step, it's not always possible. A story comes to light, the media run with it. An accident occurs; a photographer arrives on the scene with a camera. Sometimes the media will be at your door or on your phone before you are able to talk with your insurance company. In this scenario, you'll need to develop a carefully controlled message sent through one spokesperson.

There are some key tips to dealing with the media in a crisis:

- **BE PREPARED**
- Understand that the media needs a story... let it be a controlled, child-focused story that will help restore the public's confidence in how you treat the safety and security of the children. Take a deep breath, refer to your positive points and talk to the reporter about YOUR gym!
- Designate one person in your organization to speak to the media. The spokesperson should be articulate, diplomatic, and sincere. Your spokesperson, in essence, becomes the "voice" of your business on the television, in the newspaper, and over the airwaves. If that person appears caring and concerned, your organization will be perceived as such. If

possible, individual personnel should not speak with the media. Have a back-up plan in case this designated person is unavailable. Be sure to tell all of your staff who these people are and how to contact them when the media calls!

- Anticipate questions reporters will ask. Determine ahead of time what you will say and what you won't or can't say. Have fact sheets prepared. Prepare a written statement for distribution with the help of your attorney. Be sure to share this information with your staff. They may feel very threatened and/or demoralized by the bad publicity and may be receiving front line questions from clients, families and friends.
- Speak in sound bites —short sentences and concise thoughts. Don't ramble. Emphasize key points made in the news release, and don't deviate from them.
- Develop a response other than "no comment." If a criminal act has allegedly occurred, as in the case of child abuse, issue a brief statement like this: "The safety and well-being of our youth are extremely important to us. We are cooperating with the authorities in their investigation, and any comments made before the investigation is complete would be premature."
- Avoid extremes. Do not defend yourself too strenuously, appearing too eager to avoid blame; Do not lock yourself in your office, appearing to avoid responsibility.
- Maintain an open mind and a good attitude about dealing with the media. Much of the time these professionals want to work with you, not against you. Your comfort level or attitude toward the media could influence the treatment you receive.
- Announce that you take the problem seriously. Then take it seriously, even if you think the issue is non-existent or overblown. Whether it was a real problem before, it certainly is a reputation management issue now that the press has it.
- Don't lie. If you (or your staff) screwed up, admit it. The media is relatively kinder to those who openly admit they screwed up. It's disarming. Although they may not become your friend, they will at least realize that you have a conscience. That realization alone can be the difference between a hostile story and one that respects the sometimes-complicated choices we all make when performing our duties.
- After experiencing a disaster it is vital that a thorough review is undertaken of how the organization responded and coped with the emergency. Lessons can always be learned and these will not only improve the response should there be another incident, but could prevent a future disaster. It therefore makes sense to be sure to let the media know what you did in analyzing the situation and improving the response to avoid any future crisis.

Probably the best defense against negative publicity is a strong, positive relationship with the local reporters before anything "bad" occurs. If an incident occurs that could cause you and your organization grief. Be prepared with ready answers to probable questions and a couple of choice sound bytes that will look good in the paper or sound good when quoted.

Next Month – *"Making your Mark – Branding your Gym"*

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