



# HELP SHEET



## WHAT TO DO IN A MEDIA CRISIS?

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### RATIONALE

In our leagues and in our clubs largely staffed by volunteers, we cannot control the behaviour of every member. Actions whether accidental or deliberate happen and so do muck-ups, policy failures, bungles, controversies and many other embarrassments.

When the news breaks, you may find your club in the middle of a media flurry. What you want to avoid at all costs is this flurry turning into a full-blown media feeding frenzy that can cause long-term damage to your club or the league and a loss of public confidence.

Whatever it is that has happened to your club - be it accident, muck-up, controversy or legal action - the first priority for your club is to fix it and to ensure there is no continuing danger or risk to the public or any chance of the same thing happening again. And you also need to deal with the media.

### PREPARE FOR THE CRISIS

Besides preparing a risk management strategy it is a good idea for the club to set up a "communications plan". This will ensure that committee members and volunteers, directors and board members know exactly what should happen should your club be faced with a media crisis. This plan will ensure that your club has:

- Contacted the RAC/Board for support and advice, you are not in this on your own;
- An appointed spokesperson/s, usually but not always the President;
- A process where everyone in the club knows who to call should a major incident or media crisis develop;
- An established process where committee members can gather as much accurate information as quickly as possible;
- A process whereby accurate information can be provided to the media as soon as practicable;
- So what happens when the media calls about something that has gone wrong and it involves your club?

### DON'T RUN! DON'T HIDE!

The first reaction - and the worst - for most clubs is to try to ignore the attention, or say nothing and hope the story will go away. Resist the temptation to circle the wagons or stick your head in the sand. It doesn't go away and as long as what are on display are your club's failings, you're risking the ongoing hemorrhaging of support for your club.

The reality is that your club will end up having to address the issue publicly. The longer it takes, the longer the media and the public believe you have something to hide. If the club does not respond and chooses to ignore the issue the league must deal with the concerns of other clubs and the public.

The other reality is that the media will run a story. What you want as much as possible is to influence the nature of that story and ensure that what is run is accurate and fair. It is a bit rich to complain about not having your side of the story aired when you have refused to provide it.

The other theme that you want to stand out is that the incident is not acceptable and not normal and that your club is doing everything in its power to ensure that it's not repeated. Organizations that come out of a media crisis with their reputations intact are those that deal with the issue quickly, effectively, honestly - and just as importantly, are perceived to be doing exactly that. So how does a small rural club with little public relations expertise deal with the situation?

- **Decide that there is a crisis.** The successful handling of a crisis can be decided in the first hours or days. By recognizing early in the peace that you actually have a crisis on your hands, you can start to rectify it. The sooner you take action, the better your chances of coming out with your reputation intact.
- **Understand who the media represent.** While "the media" is chasing you for details, the people who are going to be most interested in reading or listening to your response will be "the

public" - and that means your members, supporters, parents of your players, businesses, sponsors, potential supporters etc. Frame your responses with the real audience in mind.

- **Decide who will be the spokesperson or public face.** Where possible ensure it is the highest-ranking person (President) who has the important mix of authority and access to all the latest information. You also need to have someone who is accessible and available to journalists.
- **You need to stay on top of a crisis,** not create a vacuum where yours is the only voice not being heard.
- **Release as much as you can as quickly as you can.** Sometimes you will be responding to an incident, such as someone getting injured, or a fraud, or a serious tribunal offence, but other times there may be serious and unfounded allegations. The more information you can release that puts the incident in context and puts your side of the story across, the better, and the quicker the better. The sooner you respond and show that you are acting in a sincere, honest and reliable manner, the sooner your voice is listened to and trusted.
- **Avoid the Bart Simpson defence.** What you emphatically do not do is give the Bart Simpson defence -*"I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, you can't prove a thing."*
- **Say only what you know to be true.** If you don't know the answer, don't guess at it. Be honest and stick to only confirmed information you know to be accurate and correct. If necessary, tell the reporter you don't know but will check it out and get back to them. Better to provide a correct answer than to flap around and guess incorrectly.
- **Remember that first impressions count.** No matter how much they try not to, the media will come with some sort of preconceived idea which normally boils down to whether you or your club are sinners or saints (in this particular incident or generally). Your attitude, openness and commitment to resolving the issue is important in ensuring they leave with a positive impression.
- **Work out what you can legally release.** If there are legal issues that come into play, be aware of where the line is drawn on what you can say. Also be aware that many legal advisers or those that pretend to know the rules will advise you to say nothing at all and that is advice that should be challenged. You have to publicly address the issue; it is only the manner or amount of information that is up for discussion.
- **Avoid speculation or answering hypothetical questions.** Try to stick to the facts and what did happen, not what might have occurred. You can fend questions off by saying things such as "I don't want to speculate on that" or "I would prefer not to deal in hypotheticals. What we do know is ..."
- **Challenge information you know to be wrong.** Don't leave wrong facts out there. If something is running that's wrong, let others know before it becomes common knowledge. Let the media organization know the information is wrong and let other clubs know so they don't repeat it. Wrong facts left unchallenged are often more damaging than the truth.
- **Show concern.** You are a community club. Your main mission is to care/service/support the community so you need to be mindful of the feelings as well as the issues. If someone has been badly affected or hurt, mentally or physically, by an action of your club, express your concern and demonstrate your compassion.
- **Don't bother blaming the media or the league.** If there is something wrong, point it out. If you have a different view, point it out. But avoid personal slanging matches. If it is a serious issue you want to be seen to be treating it seriously and dealing with it, not wasting time blaming the media for bringing to light an incident involving your club.
- **Ban the words "no comment" Forever.** Even if you keep repeating the same information you have released. Say; *"All I can say is..."* or say *"I can't provide that information until I have all the details..."* or *"I can't answer that until I have a full report"* or *"I am happy to try to answer those questions once I have spoken to the right people ..."* You never see seasoned media performers respond "No comment". The reason is that it sounds as though you know the answer but don't want to provide it.
- **Stay calm.** It's important you stay calm under pressure or swap places with someone who can. Anger makes good vision or listening and bad news for community clubs. Avoid it.
- **Consider bringing the media into your club.** Send out frequent media briefings rather than have reporters continually ringing you for comment. Be on the front foot, which gives you

time to prepare and choose your words carefully. It lets them show how you are dealing with the crisis and the difficulties and problems that you face. And that you have nothing to hide.

- **Talk in common, easily understood language.** Avoid jargon. Speak or write in a manner that ensures people can actually understand the message you are trying to portray.

### **WHAT IF THE STORY IS JUST PLAIN WRONG?**

It makes it even more important to react when the story is wrong or malicious. And this does happen. It may not get into print, but it may cause you some pain dealing with unfounded allegations.

Clubs rely on their credibility. That's what brings in donations, support, members. It is imperative to come out of any crisis with that credibility and standing intact.