

## Media Relations

### Introduction

Organizations can get into public relations trouble if too many people attempt to speak to the media on behalf of the organization, especially in emergency situations. An organizational media policy should include the development of positive, consistent messages; print and other supporting documents (including a one-page description of the organization and a press kit); and a pool of official spokespeople versed on issues that are important to the organization. By having a media policy and establishing a designated media contact — whether an officer or a staff member — the organization can help to avoid potential story inaccuracies, conflicting messages, and/or press leaks. And, in the event that the story relates to improper actions by the chief executive or members of the board, the board may want to elect an impartial spokesperson to act as the principal media contact.

### Key Elements

- The rationale behind a media policy is to ensure consistency of message. Therefore, the policy should clearly state who may speak on behalf of the organization. For some nonprofits, such as those that work on public policy issues, the media policy may designate subject matter experts on staff who have more latitude in speaking with the media on certain issues.
- The media policy needs to establish the chain of command for handling media inquiries and clarify the communication process. It should also include alternatives if the primary spokesperson is not available or if the inquiry relates to that individual.
- The policy should provide direction on whether (and what) documents may be shared with the media. All media relations should be consistent with and supportive of the overall communications objectives of the organization.
- The policy emphasizes that, as a general rule of thumb, individual board members (other than the board chair) are normally not authorized spokespersons for an organization. Instead, the board chair, the chief executive, or another designated representative should speak for the organization.

### Practical Tips

- ✓ In sharing the media policy with board and staff, explain why it is important to have a single contact person (or a designated group) for all media inquiries.
- ✓ This designated spokesperson must be able to communicate with a reporter, even if he or she needs to rely on others to provide talking points or to designate someone else to handle technical information. When appropriate, the designated

spokesperson may have other staff members provide additional information to the reporter.

- ✓ Develop and share documents that contain basic organizational talking points that board and staff members can use to introduce the organization and its activities.
- ✓ If any media inquiry involves an allegation of wrongdoing by the organization or any of its officers, directors, or employees, engage the organization's legal counsel prior to any statements being made to the media or to the general public. In some instances, an individual accused of wrongdoing may need to retain his or her own legal counsel and may not be able to communicate with the organization's legal counsel in order to avoid waiving the attorney-client privilege.

## **Sample Media Relations Policies**

General media policies tend to be brief, with more specific guidelines included in procedures. The samples provided include general media policies and a media procedures document.

1. This short policy is for a small organization that is concerned about consistency of the message.
2. This brief policy provides additional guidelines, such as including the board president as an authorized spokesperson and requiring advance approval from the chief executive.
3. This succinct policy allows the chief executive to speak out on public policy issues on behalf of the organization.
4. This statement outlines the procedures for anyone responding to a media inquiry and serves as a useful complement to the basic policy.
5. This policy, tailored to federated organizations, guides chapters to share media attention with the national office.

### **Sample #1**

*This short policy is for a small organization that is concerned about consistency of the message.*

To ensure the quality and consistency of information disseminated to media sources, the following policy shall be enforced:

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- All media inquiries are to be handled by the chief executive or his or her designee, regardless of who the media representative is, whom he or she represents, or how innocuous the request.
- All press releases or other promotional materials are to be approved by the chief executive or his or her designee prior to dissemination.

Failure to comply with the XYZ's media policy shall be grounds for disciplinary action.

## **Sample #2**

*This brief policy provides additional guidelines, such as including the board president as an authorized spokesperson and requiring advance approval from the chief executive.*

Only the chief executive, board president, board chair, or other individual(s) designated by the board are authorized to speak with the media. The chief executive and the board designate shall collaborate on message development and coordinate who will handle which press inquiries.

Employees, board members (other than the chair) and members acting in a capacity within a committee or a caucus shall not make statements, provide information for distribution, or provide background information unless specifically directed to do so by the chief executive and/or the board.

Provided that they have prior permission to do so from the chief executive or the board, employees, board members, and members acting in a capacity with a committee or a caucus shall speak publicly on behalf of XYZ only in accordance with established public speaking procedures.

## **Sample #3**

*This succinct policy allows the chief executive to speak out on public policy issues on behalf of the organization.*

## **Public Policy Statements**

The board or executive committee may agree to approve a resolution on any public issue for which it feels a "voice from XYZ" could improve the public dialogue, and the chief executive or board members are encouraged to propose such resolutions for the board's or executive committee's consideration. The chief executive is authorized to add XYZ's name to others' statements, letters, proclamations, etc. which clearly fit within the guidelines below:

Support principles of \_\_\_\_\_.

Support policies to promote \_\_\_\_\_.

Support efforts to show respect \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Chief Executive's Public Statements**

Using discretion, the chief executive may speak out or lend his or her name to positions being taken by other leaders, so long as it is made clear he or she is not representing an official position of XYZ and informs the board whenever such positions become publicly controversial. Officers and directors should be cognizant of the fact that they must avoid conflicts of interest and should always ensure that their actions and public statements do not put personal interests above the best interests of their organization.

## **Sample #4**

*This statement outlines the procedures for anyone responding to a media inquiry and serves as a useful complement to the basic policy.*

## **MEDIA INQUIRY PROCEDURES**

**Main Contact:** [Name A]

**Other Contact:** [Name B and Name C]

### **Description**

How to handle inquiries from any media such as newspaper, radio, TV, cable access, magazine, trade organizations, etc.

### **Background**

XYZ strives to advance its mission by communicating openly and honestly using consistent messages with its constituents, including the media. It is important for all XYZ staff and board members to reinforce these messages by referring all calls from any media source to the appropriate staff.

### **Procedure**

1. Please refer all calls or visits to Name A; if he or she is not available, refer to Name B; or if the inquiry is specific to grants, refer to Name C.
2. If senior staff is not available, take the following steps:
  - Find out the reporter's name, phone number, and deadline.
  - Find out the nature of the story ("*Name A is our chief executive and spokesperson for XYZ. May I ask what kind of a story you are working on so that we can gather the information and he (or she) will have all the facts in front of him (or her) when he (or she) calls you back?*"), OR, if you are sure that Name A will be available to hear a voicemail message, offer to let the reporter leave a detailed voicemail message.
  - Let the reporter know that Name A or another staff member will return the call by a stated time and date.

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- Contact Name A immediately if the deadline is imminent. His (or her) home phone \_\_\_\_; cell \_\_\_\_.
3. Please do *not* offer information to media — even if you know the answer. It is helpful for XYZ that all news contacts be handled by senior staff and documented. Also, it's too easy to get quoted as an organization spokesperson if you volunteer something the reporter wants to use. Assure the reporter that someone will respond in time to meet the deadline.

If the reporter needs an immediate response, or if Name A will not be available in time to meet the reporter's deadline, refer the call to Name B, home phone \_\_\_\_; cell \_\_\_\_\_. If it's on the subject of grants, refer the call to Name C, home phone \_\_\_\_; cell \_\_\_\_\_.

4. If you cannot reach Names A, B, or C (at work, home, or on cell phone) to respond in time for the deadline, call the reporter back, explain the situation, and apologize profusely, but still decline to answer the question yourself. *In no case* should you let the deadline come and go without any response. Then, please leave a detailed message for Name A (or B or C) so that he or she can follow up with the reporter. In general, it is not advisable to say "no comment," since that constitutes a form of an answer that may be used against the organization in some instances.

## **Key Points To Remember When Dealing with the Media:**

- Be polite.
- Be helpful.
- Find out what the reporter needs to know and what his or her deadline is.
- Don't let a deadline pass without a response.
- Don't get drawn into providing information or opinions that you don't have the authority to provide.
- Always inform Name A (or B or C) of the call for follow-up.

*Thank you for helping XYZ provide accurate, timely, honest, and thoughtful assistance to the media.*

## **Sample #5**

*This policy, tailored to federated organizations, guides chapters to share media attention with the national office.*

## **RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO THE MEDIA**

1. In the event the media contacts XYZ first, the caller's identity and reason for calling will be ascertained. If the reason for the call is anything other than basic information that would be considered public, XYZ staff will call them back after first notifying the Local Council Affiliate that an inquiry about the organization has been made.

**Note:** XYZ's call to the Local Council is a courtesy call and is not a request for permission from the Local Council to speak on their behalf. Calls from the media received by XYZ regarding Local Councils shall be handled according to the XYZ board-approved media policy.

2. If a local issue receives media attention, or has potential to draw attention (negative or positive), the Local Council shall notify XYZ within two working days as to the nature of the situation and what possible impact it will have on the Local Council Affiliate and XYZ.

## Suggested Resources

- Feinglass, Art. *The Public Relations Handbook for Nonprofits: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- Lukas, Carol and Linda Hoskins. *Nonprofit Guide to Conducting Community Forums: Engaging Citizens, Mobilizing Communities*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2003.
- Patterson, Sally J. *Generating Buzz: Strategic Communications for Nonprofit Boards*. Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2006.
- Wymer, Walter W, ed. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press.