Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service

Your local county voluntary council

10. Promotion and marketing

10.4 Working with the media

Committee members bring vision to their organisations and this gives them a definite edge when dealing with the media. Staff and stakeholders may be too wrapped up in day-to-day problems to identify areas of vulnerability or to see media opportunities when they arise.

Fundraising, public support, and reputation are all affected by media coverage. What can you do to help in a world where press coverage can make or break your organisation?

Keep your eye on the big picture

- Ensure that systems are already in place for dealing with the media. Is there someone responsible for liaising with the press? What is their brief? How are they trained to deal with media enquiries?
- Liaise with other organisations to find out how they handle media attention.
- Keep in touch with opinion makers in the community. Find out how the organisation appears in their eyes.
- Keep tabs on coverage of voluntary organisations in the media. What gets covered and how? What mistakes do organisations make, and how might these be avoided? Bring in news clippings to committee meetings, watch taped coverage and discuss.
- Identify potential problem areas: journalists are always on the lookout for scandal: Could your organisation's activities be seen as biased?
- Highlight known trouble spots and areas of worry and discuss with staff.
- Create worst-case scenarios: What is the most negative way the media could present your organisation or its activities? Talk through the ramifications and possible avoidance tactics.
- Develop a clear idea of how you would like your organisation to appear in the public eye. What activities would you particularly like the public to associate with you?
- Make media training a part of the committee induction.

Drafting a media policy

In its role as policy-maker for the organisation, the committee can help clarify media relations by working with staff and management to create an organisational media policy. This should be a statement of the organisation's stance toward the media rather than a detailed plan addressing every contingency.

(Such a plan should be left to your press officer or designated member of staff). The organisation's policy should spell out roughly how media enquiries will be handled, specifying who should speak to the media. It should also provide systems for deciding the organisation's position on any given issue, and for disseminating this information organisation-wide. It is key that the organisation appears to speak with one voice on issues and that staff, trustees, volunteers - everyone - know how to respond when approached by the press, if only to refer journalists to the right person to answer their questions.

When does the organisation speak to the media?

Normally, the Chief Executive, designated member of staff or senior volunteer will act as spokesperson to the media. However, in some situations the Chair or some other committee member may be called upon to represent the organisation. In times of crisis, such as the unexpected departure of the Chief Executive or when the organisation is facing negative issues, a committee spokesperson can present an image of stability and continuity, focusing media attention on the overall mission and long-term goals of the organisation, rather than on the current problems.

Discourage committee members who take it upon themselves to speak to the media unbidden. However, all committee members should have some training in how to deal with the media if the need arises.

Helping create a pro-active media strategy

With its unique vision of the organisation, the committee can bring an important voice to discussions about pro-active media strategy or public relations programmes. A pro-active strategy is designed to make the media work for the organisation by using it to raise the organisation's profile and keep the public eye on the positive work it does. Such a strategy would normally be implemented by staff, but the committee can help by contributing its broad awareness of the issues.

Such a strategy should include:

- Press releases about achievements. These must be well written and ready for the press to use. Look for opportunities to tie organisational activities to issues in the news.
- Speeches by key members of staff or committee members, when required.
- Inviting the media to report on special events and functions.
- Integrated public relations campaigns for special events, organisational milestones - such as inaugurating a new building or hitting a high membership mark - and fundraising drives.

Disclaimer
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