

Thorough Preparation Can Help with Walk Through Fire

Toyota is feeling the pressure. So is Tiger Woods. Their reputations are under fire, and only time will tell whether they will survive.

To think that your organization is immune to similar scrutiny is foolhardy.

According to Jan Smith, principal, Castle Rock Ranch Group, LLC (Loudonville, NY), and reputation management consultant, lots of good organizations get caught when something bad happens because they weren't prepared. "Preparation starts by thinking about the personality of your brand," Smith says. "Toyota still makes cars. How people feel about them is what changed."

Smith says the following tips will help prepare you for any eventuality:

- ✓ **Plan ahead.** Take time as a staff to ask these questions: Who are we? What do we stand for? What are the messages we want to get across? Then get it on paper, even if it's only one page. Smith says working genuinely to convey who you are before a crisis will go a long way to help you in a crisis. "These messages are who you are, *not* the crisis. If people already know you as an organization before a crisis, and know that you do the right thing, they know you'll do the right thing in the face of a crisis."
- ✓ **Know your advocates.** Knowing which third parties will speak on your behalf has more value than any ad campaign or media blitz. "Think about where it is most important for your organization to have connections so people know you, understand you and believe in you," says Smith.
- ✓ **Play "what if."** Brainstorm the four or five most likely, horrible scenarios your organization could face. Consider what questions might be asked and write your responses. Decide on a chain of contact and make sure the press knows it.
- ✓ **Consider your resources.** Are there some situations that may require help from outside PR resources? If you think you would need additional help at some point, figure out who that would be now and put them on alert.
- ✓ **Recognize your role.** Nonprofits are a vital part of the local community and no one wants to see that go bad, Smith says. Remember this when conveying your message.

Smith says the best way to be prepared is to behave naturally with proper background and training. "It's about mixing good judgment with concern. People want to know what you know and what's going to happen next. They also want to know you are concerned and that you are genuine. If you're prepared, there's a 100 percent chance you'll do well."

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