Bad Press / Damage Control
Strategy Checklist

Be Ready For The Inevitable

It is critical to have a strategy & plan in place before industry or in-house circumstances lead to bad press. Here are suggestions for building your damage control program.

Primary Goal

Make this "news" go away as quickly as possible, with as little long-term damage as possible.

Here are suggestions for building your damage control program.

Create Infrastructure

The program should be based on systems that are easy to understand and implement. Systems require infrastructure.

- Database & communication system - This can include phone (individual and/or an auto-dial system), e-mail/texting (individual and/or group) and/or Twitter. Note: Be aware that phone and electronic messages can be saved and then shared with family members, the press and authorities.
  - Internal company communication. This includes awareness of the chain of command and the necessary access. It is also critical that you have a system established to communicate with every staff member.
  - Resident/Family
  - Local community professionals and organizations - Referral sources, vendors and allies.
  - Authorities - Legal, health, industry. It can be very helpful to build professional relationships with authorities before an incident occurs.
  - The Media - TV, print, radio, internet. It is important to build professional relationships with these representatives before an incident occurs.
  - Social Networks - Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, youtube, etc.

- Monthly contact program - Having a regular contact program can allow you to deal with an issue without looking like you are going out of your way. Extra communications may escalate the perceived negative impression of the situation.

- Website update system - In addition to supporting the monthly contact program (above), website updates can also support your positioning and expertise by providing evidence and history of your care for seniors. (An Activity Scrapbook page can include dates that establish history of care, activity and involvement, and a Caregiver Tips page can share your expertise and passion for senior care.)
Choose Representation

It is important that everyone on staff know ahead of time who the chosen representation will be. This choice should be based on position in the company along with communication skills, confidence level and the image they present. For example, a company president who communicates poorly or is not comfortable in front of a camera or group should delegate this responsibility to someone more qualified.

- Representatives should be:
  - Calm - Nerves create doubt and suspicion that will keep the issue open longer.
  - Concerned - Your focus is always on your residents and their families, and the delivery of exceptional care.
  - Compassionate - Let people know you understand what the resident and their families are going through. (See positioning statement.)

- Do not be defensive (unless you are really being severely misrepresented and have no other choice). Being defensive can lead to investigation and debate. This can escalate the issue and can keep the matter in the news much longer.

- All representatives should be saying the same things. Inconsistency will lead to suspicion and keep the issue open longer.

- Instruct all employees on:
  - What has happened.
  - What they should say if approached by the press. Typically, they defer to the designated. "The best person to answer your questions is _____________, our Executive Director. Please speak with her/him." They may then offer a contact number or summon the Executive Director.
  - Explain the consequences if an employee speaks to the press.
  - What will be said to the press so the staff knows ahead of time. Also, you know they will chat with family and friends and, hopefully, this will help them to speak from the company perspective.

Take A Proactive Approach

You want to be as proactive as possible. If you feel that the news will get into the press, these actions should be considered.

- If possible and appropriate, inform the press yourself. (Utilize relationships you have built with the media.)

- Inform residents in person.

- Inform families of residents.
  - In person, when possible, especially if they are directly affected.
  - By phone, prior to them reading/seeing/hearing in the press.
  - By letter, to support your meeting or phone call. This may also provide them with a tool to defend their desire to keep their loved one in your facility.
If there is a legal issue with a staff member that affects a resident (theft or abuse for example), if possible, be involved with making the charges for the arrest. You stand for the law and want to protect your residents.

Dealing With Reporters

Remember, reporters are doing their jobs. Oh yes, some may be intrusive or rude. Most will be professional, looking to accurately inform their audience.

- Communicate willingly. If they sense you are holding back, their instinct will kick in and they will dig deeper.
- Meet deadlines. Do not make their job harder, cause frustration or create aggravation.
- Be accessible.

An Apology Is Expected

If a mistake is made or someone is negatively impacted, an apology is necessary and expected. The apology must be accurate and heart-felt. You should apologize verbally and in writing.

- "Our hearts go out to our resident and her/his family members, and we 'sincerely' apologize for any pain and suffering our staff member has caused them. We are so sorry for this incident that goes completely against our the core values of staff honesty and integrity."
- Send a personal letter to inquiries, residents/family members and referral sources.
- Send out a press release to the media that includes your apology.

Positioning Statement

When put in a corner, not sure what to say, you can always come back to your positioning statement(s) that declare your purpose and/or passion. Here is an example.

- "We love seniors, and work very hard to make their lives easier, more active and enjoyable." (You can also utilize your USP, if it is appropriate.)

When appropriate, include the longevity of your facility and/or corporate company to demonstrate how long you have been successfully serving seniors.

- "For 14 years, we have been providing exceptional care for seniors, and earning the respect and gratitude of their family members."

Utilize a personal quote representing yourself, and the company, as well.

- "I/we feel terrible for our resident and the whole ____________ family. They should not have been subjected to this and we will do whatever we can to make it up to them. We would like the opportunity to rebuild their trust in us. I also feel bad for the rest of our staff who were tainted by this incident, even though they put their hearts into providing exceptional care for seniors every day."
Bad Press / Damage Control Strategy Checklist, cont’d

Response to Questions

Have the facts before facing individuals and the press. It is critical to be honest when answering questions. Lying will only make the situation worse. "No comment" or avoiding/ignoring a question will probably buy you some time on question you cannot or don't want to answer. It may be better to promise an answer in the future.

Whenever you can, look to provide support to your responses. You can associate with others who are held in esteem, tell a story about something positive, refer to a photo/video on your website or produce helpful documents.

Here is an example of dealing with question about employee theft if someone asks "how much was stolen?"

- Anything stolen is too much and breaks the law. In addition, it goes against our core values of staff honesty and integrity that all our employees agree to upon hiring. (If you have such a page in your employee manual, make it available for the press.)

If someone asks "do you do background checks?"

- Yes, we do central background checks through ______________________. (Offer an application form and/or background check form sample(s), if you have one, so the questions and requirements asked of your the employees can be seen.)

Monitor & Utilize Social Media

Social media may pick up the story, so you have to monitor it. In fact, you should try to use it to your advantage. Here are some suggestions.

- Search the internet and the social networks for negative comments.
- If a negative comment appears, do not be defensive. Instead...
  - If it is a single comment on a page that gets little participation, you may just let it be so you don't make the issue noticeable. However, continue to monitor it.
  - Utilize some of the positioning statements above.
  - When appropriate, you can also included links to your Activity Scrapbook or Caregiver Tips pages.
  - Insert a link to your published apology.