

Positively React to **NEGATIVE** Press



by Tracy Kosbau

It's one of your worst nightmares. A reporter and TV camera crew show up at your restaurant and after the first question, it's painfully clear that this is not going to be a positive story. Many restaurants have had to deal with less than favorable and sometimes downright damaging media attention. A negative inspection report, an employee scandal, a foodborne illness outbreak, teen labor violations, a crime occurring at your restaurant, could all put you unwillingly in the spotlight.

If this happens to you, **DON'T PANIC**. How you handle being thrust into the spotlight can make a difference on the impact it has on your business. You can't necessarily "manage" the media, but you can control what you say and how you say it to minimize negative results.

As a veteran public relations professional working at an advertising agency and as the current director of public relations for the Wisconsin

Restaurant Association, I've had a front row seat to the media circus—both positive and negative situations. I've seen people handle the media expertly and, on occasion, I've seen things go terribly wrong. The difference usually comes down to being prepared or not. Here are a few tips on making the best of a not so great situation.

Unwanted media attention

One of the most feared scenarios is the "dirty dining" type of segment where a reporter is following up on what they deem to be a bad health inspection report. Other investigative-type reports are equally intimidating like the time a Milwaukee TV station decided to purchase food from local restaurants and have a lab check the calories against the nutritional information the restaurants provided to customers. One of the challenges with these types of reports is that food safety and nutritional science are complex

and reporters may have misconceptions that play into how they cover the story. The Wisconsin Restaurant Association is a great resource if you find yourself in one of these situations. WRA staff has been interviewed by the media on food safety issues for dirty dining type stories countless times and can help set the facts straight.

Another challenging situation is when your business has been fined for violating a government regulation, like child labor laws. Other unwanted media attention could come from a crime occurring at your restaurant or an employee scandal. While these instances are rare, it helps to be prepared, just in case.

Be ready with a plan

The biggest mistake you can make is to think that this will never happen to you. Have a crisis communications plan in place. Part of your plan should include making sure all employees

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Crisis Communication Do's and Don'ts

DO

- Tell the truth
- Show compassion
- Be available
- Be proactive
- Be positive
- Anticipate questions
- Rehearse your message
- Think before you speak
- Respect deadlines

DON'T

- Tell half-truths or speculate
- Place blame
- Lose your temper
- Be defensive
- Say "no comment"
- Speak "off the record"
- Try to wing it
- Talk too fast
- Ignore media calls

know what to do and what to say if a reporter calls or if a camera crew shows up at your establishment. In particular, make sure the managers on all shifts are informed of the plan for handling media contact. Designate one or two people who are the only ones authorized to be interviewed by the media. It is critical that everyone on your staff understands who is allowed to speak to the media and how those individuals can be reached in an emergency.

Don't panic

Stay calm; keep a clear head. You may feel helpless in a situation like this, but you do have control over how you react. What you do and say when media come calling can make a difference.

No comment usually isn't the best option

Keep in mind that if you don't talk, chances are someone else will. There may be some exceptions to this rule, but in general, working with the media usually increases the likelihood that your side of the story will be heard—not just the observations of an uninformed bystander—or worse, a disgruntled former employee. Depending on the scope of the crisis, the media could even descend on the scene. If that happens, realize that they'll be willing to talk to anyone at the site. Even if there are no cameras in front of your business (yet), if a reporter calls you, they've probably also called other places to request an interview. In many cases, they're going to file a story with or without your cooperation.

The blame stops here

When talking with the media, make

sure to be as positive as possible. If you're responding to a negative food safety report, make sure to convey how important food safety is to your foodservice operation and what you have done to remedy the situation and prevent future problems. Avoid phrases like "we try" or "we do our best." Make sure to state the facts and don't make excuses.

It's important that you aren't defensive. Don't refuse to return media phone calls. This is the wrong response—you appear to be uncooperative, or worse, covering up. Avoid answering a question with "no comment." In today's skeptical society, this answer generally implies guilt.

Show that you're willing to be cooperative

The more cooperative you are, the more likely they are to treat you fairly and not want to cause you trouble. Showing them that you're just a business owner trying to make a living certainly can't hurt. If you treat the media like the enemy, they are likely to treat you the same way.

It also helps to have the attitude that "you have nothing to hide." For example, a Milwaukee area restaurateur was contacted by a local TV station that was doing a dirty dining segment and saw something that caught their attention in their inspection report. The restaurant owner explained the violation and was very open, inviting the reporter to come in anytime the owner or manager is there and they would be happy to take them anywhere in the restaurant and show them anything. The owner felt that

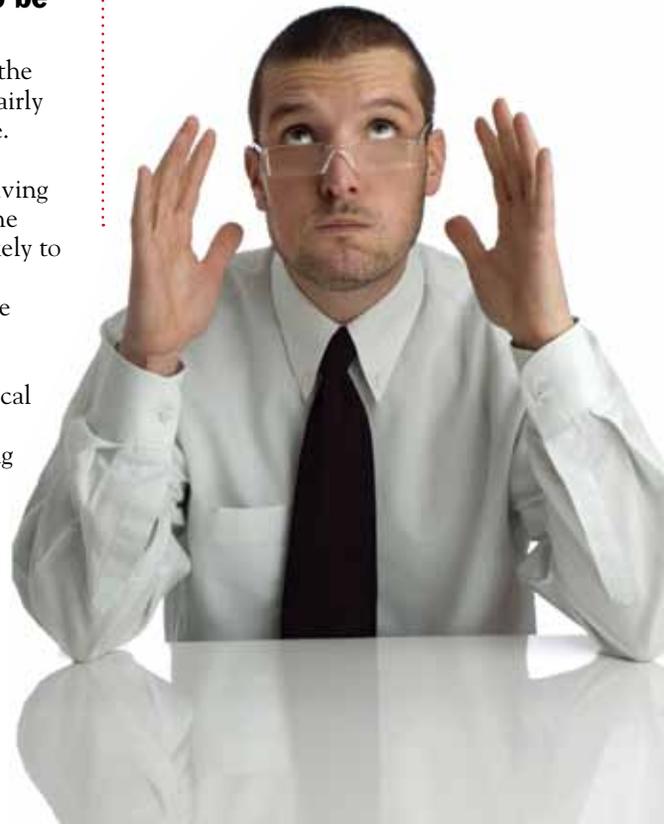
his "nothing to hide" attitude helped convince the reporter that there wasn't going to be anything worth reporting on.

If the restaurant was at fault in any way, explain what steps you are taking to rectify the problem and make sure it won't happen again. Correct any inaccuracies that have appeared in news reports.

What you put in writing could hurt you

It's always good to be cautious about what you put in writing about the situation. Be very careful with e-mail correspondence or anything in writing discussing the situation. This information could get into the media's hands and make the situation look worse and could be taken out of context.

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Don't take it personally

The media's goal is to create a story that gets the public's attention. They are focused on learning as much information as possible and providing this information to the public on a frantic deadline. During a crisis, you may feel that reporters are being hostile or overly demanding. In truth, their focus is the story and the public's right to know. You are just an unfortunate casualty.

Keep staff informed

Make sure your employees are clued in to what's going on. They probably have questions and concerns, and may be feeling stress or guilt, depending on the situation. They don't need to know all the details, but it's important for them to be informed. Be aware that your staff could be approached by the media so make it clear to staff that any media must be directed to the designated spokespeople. No other staff should be speaking with the media, on or off premise. No exceptions.



You'll get through it

When you're in the middle of a media crisis, it may seem like the whole world is watching. But the reality is not everyone is going to hear about it and these things often blow over very quickly. Being smart—and calm—about how you handle the situation can help you come out of it OK.

These articles and additional media communication tips for restaurateurs can be found in "Members Only" on the WRA website at www.wirerestaurant.org.

Thank you to Sara Stinski and Cynthia Whitney-Ward for contributing to this article.

Dealing with a negative review



Getting a negative review is a slightly different situation because generally the review just appears without your prior knowledge. And even if the restaurant suspects they are being reviewed, there's no opportunity to comment beyond the experience the reviewer has in the restaurant. But there are still things you can do to turn a not so good review into a positive.

For example, an iconic restaurant in Seattle which had been *the* gathering place for generations, received a scathing review. Rather than taking a negative attitude about it, they turned it into a positive. They took the review to heart and sat down with the entire staff to make positive changes. They revamped the menu and even made some interior changes. Instead of being defensive about the review, they took it as a wakeup call to make their restaurant even better. After they made these changes, the reviewer came back and the review was stellar.

It may sound cliché, but the best defense is to treat every day as if a reviewer could walk in the door. An added benefit is that your most important audience—your customers—will have the best possible experience. WR



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