

Managing news media during a crisis event










The public is increasingly turning to social media for their news, and traditional news outlets are often covering stories based on information that is trending on social media. Because of these trends, accusations lodged online against someone in the veterinary community have an even greater potential to negatively impact the credibility of a veterinary clinic, school, or other organization—and should be taken seriously and addressed promptly. Public trust in an organization in times of crisis is greatly influenced by its ability to communicate effectively, using credible and knowledgeable spokespersons.

During times of crisis, news media are an important audience as well as a channel to reach other important audiences. You can choose to engage them proactively by sharing your news with them first—which may influence how they report the story. Or you can choose to provide a prompt and effective response if media reach out to you.

There may be some situations where you cannot provide information to the media, for legal or for confidentiality reasons. Consult with legal counsel to understand any potential legal exposure related to releasing information.

News media basics

Journalists and news producers are always looking for stories. They evaluate certain storytelling elements called “news pegs” to determine if a story is newsworthy. While routine negative customer reviews likely won’t escalate to news media coverage, some reputation attacks will be deemed newsworthy if they include certain characteristics. Those could include two or more of these elements:

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Immediacy/Timeliness – It’s new or just happened
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Conflict/Controversy – There are accusations or allegations of egregious actions by a veterinarian or clinic that conflicts with what the public expects
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Significance/Consequence – It impacts many people (or has the potential to)
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Prominence – If a vet clinic has prominence in a community or if a celebrity or community leader has an adverse event with a clinic, serious accusations against it could attract media attention. Also, if the pet involved is a social media influencer (high volume of followers on social media platforms) this can generate online and media interest, as the pet influencer has established credibility and access to a large audience.
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Odd/Unusual – It’s something that deviates sharply from what the public expects (for example, if a beloved pet dies during what was meant to be a routine check-up)
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Currency – The situation relates to a current trend or story in the news. This could include inflation and its impact on the cost of pet care, for example
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Novelty – There’s an element of “first,” “only,” “biggest,” etc. In the case of a cyber-attack, this could include a veterinary bill that is perceived to be the largest or overly substantial (which could also be considered an odd or unusual news peg and attract media and public interest)
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Proximity/Nearness – It involves a local clinic and local media
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Human interest – Many people own pets, so stories related to pet care, especially if the story includes other elements like conflict/controversy, prominence or currency, may be newsworthy

What media need and expect when reporting on a story

To provide an interesting and trustworthy story to the public, the media have a set of criteria they need from their sources.

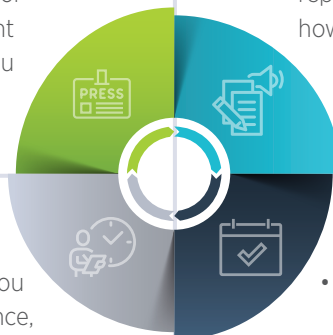
- **Accurate information** – First and foremost, they need the facts. If you're going to respond to the media, make sure to get the facts together ahead of time and get all approvals on what is to be released. Having to issue a correction or clarification regarding a key part of your public statements can be damaging. Not only does this erode trust with journalists, but in the social media environment, correcting misinformation that already is in the public realm is very challenging. And never engage in hypotheticals or mislead.
- **Truthfulness** – Make sure the information you provide is truthful to avoid making the crisis worse by facing a potential defamation or other legal claim. Truth is a complete defense to defamation claims. **Be aware of any potential legal or ethical impact related to client confidentiality provisions, or other restrictions on the release of client information.** A client may waive confidentiality of their information if they share details about their animal's care with the media or on social media, but check your state practice act to be sure.
- **Timely response** – Just as importantly, the media need information quickly. Often media are working on same-day—sometimes same-hour—deadlines and expect a prompt response when they reach out to you for comment.

Not responding promptly or missing their deadline will not prevent them from covering the story. It will only ensure that your side of the story isn't included, and you will have no input or control over the information included.

What to do when media contact you during a crisis

When you decide to respond to the media:

- **Find out the name of the reporter and the outlet they work for.** This will allow you to do a little research ahead of an interview to anticipate what to expect based on the reporter's previous stories. As a guideline, if the organization contacting you is one that has been covering the community for a long time, is well-established, has a significant number of viewers, readers, listeners, etc., you should take the inquiry seriously.
- **Find out as much as you can about the nature of their story.** Don't assume you know what they are covering or the angle they are taking. Gather as many details as you can. Ask who else they are interviewing and what they are hearing from other sources. Get the reporter's questions for you, and find out where and how the story will run (broadcast, online, print, etc.).
- **Ask what their deadline is.** If you know that you may struggle to meet their deadline (for instance, within the hour) tell them so and explain why, such as that you are still gathering information and want to ensure accuracy. See if there is any flexibility on their deadline so that you can provide them the most complete and accurate information.
- **Do everything possible to meet their deadline.** This is your opportunity to inform and shape the story and how you and your organization are represented. If you miss the deadline, you may not have that chance again, and the crisis could escalate if it appears your organization is being evasive or uncooperative.



For an incident that garners a substantial amount of news media coverage or social media attention, you may want to engage a local public relations firm with crisis communications and reputation recovery expertise. However, in most cases, outside support beyond legal counsel most likely isn't necessary.

Best practice tips for communicating during a crisis

Preparing to respond to a crisis

- Remember that the top priority is health and safety, including that of clinic staff, clients, and the animals you care for
- Gather the most complete information available
- Create an inventory of what you don't know
- Decide how you can remedy the situation
- Engage legal counsel to determine what information can be shared without violating confidentiality or compromising current or potential legal actions
- Determine who will be the spokesperson (i.e., the clinic owner) and how you will respond (for example, a written statement, phone interview, in-person interview, or on-camera/zoom interview)
- Assign a team member to monitor your social media pages to avoid your pages being overrun by online trolls or cyberbullies

Responding to a crisis

- Be compassionate
- Provide accurate information
- Show confidence and keep your cool
- Show natural emotions
- Keep it simple—prepare a few key messages that you want to ensure are included in the story. Flag them and emphasize them during your interviews
- If you're not sure, say so, and, where possible, give a reason why
- Don't speculate or answer hypothetical questions
- Have responses to anticipated questions ready
- Stay in control of the release of information—it's best to disclose all bad news clearly, quickly, and with compassion (in accordance with advice from legal counsel)
- Designate a single contact for reporters to ensure consistency of the message
- Contain and control rumors—correct inaccuracies
- When you're done with your answer, stop speaking. Don't try to fill silences.

Actions that will make the crisis worse

- Lack of communication—responding with “no comment” could create the impression you have something to hide
- Delayed action or response
- Incomplete disclosure
- Failure to get the worst news out quickly (in accordance with the guidance above)
- Putting economic interests first
- Being slow to express compassion
- Expressing inappropriate emotions
- Making false statements or embellishing details
- Engaging in arguments online with cyberbullies or trolls

After responding to the crisis

Track and monitor news media stories. If you see factual inaccuracies in reporting (especially online reporting), reach out to the reporter immediately to correct those errors. Media are often cooperative to correct inaccuracies, which is especially important for online publications that have a long shelf life and tend to get repeatedly shared through social media.



Correct factual inaccuracies, especially online reporting



Monitor activity on your social media pages related to the situation and respond to comments about the event if needed to provide your point of view and correct any misperceptions. This will be a case-by-case evaluation—it isn't always wise to respond. Sometimes your engagement may give more life to a story, but if the post already has traction and includes incorrect information, it may be effective for you to respond.

Evaluate on a case-by-case basis—it isn't always wise to respond



Hold a “morning after” meeting with your colleagues or crisis response team to evaluate how the incident was handled, what needs to happen next, determine alternative approaches, and examine what can be done in the future to avoid such incidents from occurring



Debrief after the crisis



Consider enlisting other colleagues (such as individuals from other clinics or schools) to stand up for you on social media—this sometimes happens organically

Enlist colleagues and individuals



Activate reputation recovery communications following the crisis event



Reputation recovery