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How to handle a social media crisis

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By Evan Burrell

There seems to be a social media crisis or PR nightmare almost every other week nowadays, and even your Rotary club isn't immune to a potential crisis that can blow out of all proportion.

Crisis planning is essential and an effective crisis plan is based first and foremost on truth, transparency, and sincerity. Every Rotary club should have a strategy for how it will deal with a public relations disaster, either online or offline. If your club does not have a plan in place, I recommend your club devise one as a matter of urgency.

As part of your crisis plan, make sure you or the club leadership can confidently answer these following questions:

- Who will handle your social media accounts in case of a crisis?
- What will that person be authorized to write on social media about the crises?
- Will they need approval for every post?
- What will the messaging be across all the different platforms i.e. social media, traditional media, other Rotary clubs etc.?
- Will you have more than one person responding to online posts or offline discussion?
- What social media posts will you proactively put out there to manage it?

Managing the Crisis

There is no one answer to managing a crisis, you need to do what is best for you and your club. Here are some ideas for successfully managing a social media crisis.

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1: Identify & Communicate

If a crisis is identified, urgently inform the club leadership, tell them what's wrong and give them as much information as you are able to. They may need to seek legal advice or act on the information you give.

2. Acknowledge

Some companies first response is "yes, we realize something has happened" etc. If you don't have all answers though, then it is a good idea to seek direction on a proper acknowledgment of the crisis. A proper well-informed response may stop nonfactual gossip, messages, or comments.

3. Respond quickly

Once you have some relevant information and received some direction, you should respond to the crisis ASAP. A timely response is essential in limiting the reach and potential damage. Be prepared to acknowledge the crisis within a few hours or at least a day. Two weeks after the crisis has started is way too late!

4. Manage the situation

If you have posted a response to the crisis on your club Facebook page, be cautious about removing comments made by members of the public (unless they are offensive comments, or could be libelous, etc.) To be seen to manipulate the responses to the crisis by selective deleting can itself result in a backlash.

You never know where or when a crisis will break. However, if you manage it properly, the fallout can be minimized.

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