



Nonprofits: You too could fall victim to a celebrity scandal

Celebrities — whether they're Hollywood stars, hometown sports heroes or local TV news anchors — can provide a big boost to the not-for-profits they publicly support. The flip side is that stars can also harm an organization by association. Accusations connected with the #MeToo movement and other scandals have recently brought down many famous people and, in some cases, caused major headaches for the charities they've supported.

Collateral damage

In one example, an arts foundation established by an award-winning actor was shuttered last year after several people accused him of sexual misconduct. But even charities with more tenuous ties to disgraced celebrities have experienced loss of donor and public support.

If your organization is caught off guard by a scandal, the first general rule is to act fast. A quick initial response should acknowledge the reports, express concern and make your nonprofit's relationship with the accused individual clear. Follow up regularly as new details and developments emerge. It's important to remember that whether those associated with your nonprofit are actually guilty matters little in the court of public opinion. To protect your reputation, you need to create distance between your organization and the accused.

What you can control

But don't wait for your charity to make headlines for all the wrong reasons. Take these steps before a PR disaster occurs:

1. If you're considering partnering with a celebrity, thoroughly research his or her reputation, background, work, and previous charitable commitments to help ensure they're consistent with your mission and values.
2. Include a "morals clause" in contracts with spokespeople. The clause should specify triggering events (for example, an arrest or even negative publicity) and authorize your organization to terminate the agreement without notice.
3. Create a PR crisis plan. Decide who will speak for your nonprofit, what they'll say and what forms of media (for example, press releases) they'll use. Make sure support players — such as legal counsel and PR consultants — will be available should you need them.
4. Even if your executive director is your organization's official voice, employees and volunteers need to understand their roles in a PR crisis. Establish policies for communicating with the public, particularly online.
5. Get to know your local media when you have good news to share. If local reporters are already familiar with your organization, they may give you the benefit of the doubt and provide sympathetic coverage if the news is negative.

Best possible action

Public perceptions are difficult to influence in the best of times. But if your nonprofit finds itself at the center of a PR crisis through no fault of its own, the worst possible action is to take none.

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