

# Protecting your museum's reputation when crisis strikes

*Museums are, by their very nature, risk averse, but as public organisations they are subject to a wide range of hazards. Museum objects can be stolen, members of the public can hurt themselves, working machinery can malfunction, activists can object to your latest exhibition or sponsor. Once you are caught up in the maelstrom of crisis management it is all too easy to make mistakes that could damage your reputation or make the situation worse. Recovering from negative publicity is time consuming and demoralising. So, don't get caught out. The following guidelines are distilled from the experience of a range of museums and similar organisations*

## **Preparing for an incident:**

- Have an up-to-date crisis management policy, emergency plan and communications strategy.
- Ensure that all senior staff have appropriate media training.
- Develop good relations with the police and emergency services.
- Ensure that the organisation's core function is fully understood and that it is communicated effectively. A strong brand means that you can weather crises more easily because the event will be atypical and you can turn people's attention to your known strengths.
- Identify whether the museum is involved in a supply chain that could stimulate protest? Are you sourcing supplies that are manufactured unethically or are environmentally damaging?
- Are any of your buildings at risk as a landmark building to showcase an unrelated protest?

## **When an incident occurs:**

- Implement the Communication Strategy – who needs to know – Chief Executive, Chair of Trustees, elected members, the communications team.
- Keep your own staff informed at the earliest opportunity and provide them with regular updates. If information is confidential, explain and trust them - it will leak out anyway so better to be on the front foot.
- Don't hush up sensitive events – agree a clear and accurate narrative and communicate this clearly and quickly to key stakeholders and the media as necessary.
- Be honest about what has happened. So many public scandals are about the cover-up not the actual incident.
- Liaise with protestors to find a way forward.
- Start the investigation into the incident immediately so that you can capture as much helpful information as possible. You will then be able to report positively on remedial actions that are being taken.

## **Media strategy:**

The media will want as quickly as possible:

- The facts. What has happened?
  - A narrative. Why does this matter?
  - Solutions. What are you doing about it?
  - Responsibility. Do you care about what has happened and are you sorry?
  - Regularly updated information to move the story along.
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- Identify a senior officer as spokesperson to ensure clear messages.
  - The media sees itself as the guardian of the public interest. Don't try and fob them off but use the opportunity to raise awareness of issues.
  - Do not speculate or make things up because this will be picked up. If you don't know, say so, and that you will be finding out.
  - Ensure that you are behaving transparently. This is particularly important with the increase in media attention and rise of social media.
  - Talk to the media immediately. They will have to file a story and it's better if they can get the information first hand from you. Provide regular updates as new information becomes available but don't spend all your time giving media interviews.
  - Consider how you will deal with the media on site – what they can be shown and photograph. Make them feel welcome.
  - In news releases don't just stick to dry facts but bring in some human interest to give "colour" to the story and to better explain what your organisation is about.
  - Don't start blaming everyone else. Defend your staff and your previous good record.
  - Monitor stories going out in order to amend your communications strategy as necessary.
  - Obtain external objective advice to support your actions if necessary.

## **Finally....**

Monitor and evaluate your crisis management strategy so you can apply lessons learned in the future.

Hopefully, none of this will be needed but it's better to be prepared.