

Nonprofits: You too could fall victim to a celebrity scandal

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Celebrities — whether they're Hollywood stars, hometown sports heroes or local TV news anchors — can provide a big boost to the charities they publicly support. A celebrity can help raise awareness of your mission, attract new audiences, generate donations and change public opinion on an issue.

The flip side is that stars can also harm an organization by association. Accusations connected with the #MeToo movement have recently brought down many famous people and, in some cases, caused major headaches for the charities they've supported.

Collateral damage

In one of the more extreme examples, an arts foundation established by an award-winning actor was shuttered earlier this year after several people accused him of sexual misconduct. But even charities whose ties to disgraced celebrities are more tenuous have experienced decreased donations and loss of public support. Of course, the risk of becoming collateral damage isn't new. Long before #MeToo, charities grappled with such PR challenges as board members arrested for drunk driving and major donors indicted for embezzlement.

If you're caught off guard in one of these scenarios, the first general rule is to act fast. A quick initial response should, if nothing else, 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 of a crime, ethical violation or bad behavior 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 nonprofit to make headlines for all the wrong reasons. Take these steps before a PR disaster to minimize the damage to your organization's reputation:

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 own organization's mission and values.
2. Work with your attorney to craft a "morals clause" to be included in contracts with spokespeople. The clause should specify triggering events (for example, an arrest, a social media feud or even negative publicity) and authorize your organization to terminate the agreement with little or no notice.
3. Create a PR crisis plan. Decide who will speak for your nonprofit, roughly what they'll say and what forms of media (for example, press releases or press conferences) they'll use. Make sure support players — such as legal counsel and external PR consultants — will be available should you need them. And board members need to be prepared for emergency meetings and votes.
4. Even if your executive director is your organization's official voice, employees and volunteers need to understand their roles in a PR crisis. This starts well before there's an emergency. Establish policies and procedures 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 and its leaders, they're more likely to 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 at 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.