

LANDSLIDES, DECK COLLAPSES AND OTHER DISASTERS BRING THE MEDIA TO THE DOORSTEPS OF COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS ALL THE TIME. EVEN THE LAS VEGAS SHOOTER LIVED IN AN ASSOCIATION, AND THE ASSOCIATION'S MANAGEMENT COMPANY AND BOARD OF DIRECTORS HAD TO FACE THE "MEDIA STORM." IF THEY HAVEN'T ALREADY, THE MEDIA WILL VISIT YOUR ASSOCIATION. THEIR VISIT MAY BE PLANNED, OR IT MAY BE UNEXPECTED, AND YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO RESPOND. THIS DISCUSSION WILL HELP YOU DELIVER AN ORGANIZED, ACCURATE AND CALM RESPONSE. MEDIA INTERACTION OR STATEMENTS OFTEN INVOLVE A CRISIS, DISASTER OR CONTROVERSY, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE A GREAT TOOL TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT ASSOCIATIONS.

## ORGANIZED MEDIA RESPONSE FOR COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION MANAGERS & BOARD MEMBERS



My Community Association Media Response story goes back to 1998 when the Laguna Niguel Landslide occurred. Today, we continue to be at the forefront of media response for associations faced with disasters. At 4:00 a.m., a giant hillside in Laguna Niguel began to crumble and homes literally broke off of the hilltop. We represented the condominium association at the bottom of the hill, and were on site by 5:00 a.m. along with the media! What would you do if seven TV reporters, two radio reporters and five newspaper reporters were all at your association at 6:00 a.m.? It didn't stop. By 11:30 the helicopters came back, buzzing overhead for the noon news programs. This continued for the 5:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and late evening news programs. Here are some of the headlines:

"DESTRUCTION WITHOUT DEATH,"  
*The New York Times*

"YOU COULD HEAR THE GROUND  
CREEPING UNDER,"  
*USA Today*

"DREAMS CRUMBLE ALONG WITH HILL,"  
*The Los Angeles Times*

While this may sound legendary, this is a very real example of what each of you as professional association managers or volunteer board members could potentially face.

Fast forward to 2015 and the Berkeley deck collapse, which brought the national and international media to another one of our community association clients. During the early hours of Tuesday, June 16, 2015, thirteen college students attending a birthday party were standing on the 4th floor balcony of the

Library Gardens apartment building in Berkeley. It suddenly collapsed, leaving six people dead and seven severely injured. Why did the media come to us? Because the same contractor who built the association we represented, also built the Berkeley building. The media uncovered nearly \$30 million in confidential construction defect payouts on other apartment and condominium associations by this same local contractor. What would you do if the Los Angeles Times showed up on your doorstep wanting to tour your community and asking to speak directly to your owners?

### OFFENSIVE V. DEFENSIVE MEDIA RESPONSE

We have learned over the years that there is nothing to fear. Reporters just want the truth, and they rely on each of us to get that truth to the public. To get to that truth, there are two ways to consider your approach to media response. Namely, an offensive and a defensive approach.

In the offensive position, media response includes taking an active role in providing information to the media. You have the control to organize calls, interviews and plan a visit. You can create the story instead of having someone create it for you.

Defensive media response begins with the unplanned visit. Controversy is not necessarily a bad thing. It can give you the chance to reach large numbers of people with your community's point-of-view.

Both of these approaches occurred while we helped our association respond to the Berkeley deck collapse. Yes, this occurred at an apartment building and it was devastating.

However, it gave us the opportunity to educate the media and public about community associations. We got to explain that this condition occurs at associations too. We explained who is responsible for common area repairs, what an association's duties are to its owners, and why a reporter should speak with the manager or a board member and not an owner about their specific story.

### THE OFFENSIVE APPROACH TO MEDIA RESPONSE

You provide a service when sending out a news release or educating a reporter. It involves:

- Introducing yourself to the media;
- Planning a story/press release;
- Deciding who is the best spokesperson (the manager, the board member, etc.);
- How to get your story across;
- How to follow up with reporters.

Reporters will advise your association whether:

1. It is all right to acknowledge there is another point-of-view to the story they are writing.
2. In legal situations, when it is appropriate to refer them to legal counsel.

### THE DEFENSIVE APPROACH TO MEDIA RESPONSE

If you are the object of a media attack, be prepared with your strongest response while trying to maintain dignity. Defensive

media response can involve inaccurate reporting, tabloid shows and more. What if an article says something untrue or distorted about your association or even fails to tell the whole story? What is important to you may be trivial to the press and the public. But we can't attribute bad motives to the press or question their integrity.

Here are some tips:

Be prepared with facts, details and a spokesperson should a crisis occur.

1. If a crisis or controversial event does occur, call on any reporter who has visited to make sure your story is accurate, even if the reporter does not call you.
2. Never say "No Comment." You can ask to call the reporter back with a prepared response.
3. Always respond. Studies show that the public perceives anyone that is credited with "Could not be reached for comment" as guilty and finds fault with this response.

### TABLOID SHOWS

There is no question that they are sensational and exploitive. Katie Couric once did a story on an association that forced the parents of a terminally ill boy to remove their tree house, the very thing that this boy cherished in his dying days.

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## Organized Media Response for Community Association Managers & Board Members

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Advice from the experts includes:

- Don't try to win them over with charm;
- Don't try to outsmart them by confronting them aggressively;
- Don't try to outrun them (a camera from the back doesn't present your best);
- Don't decline an on-camera conversation, but do offer a prepared statement in writing;

Bottom Line: keep your emotions in check.

### INTRODUCING YOURSELF TO THE MEDIA

Reporters like to receive information from the public because it gives them the facts they need to write their stories. It is a good idea to know the paper/magazine/show before you write to them. This allows you to plan your own story. The best format is a press release, but a simple letter will also do. All of this goes a long way to:

- Educate and inform;
- Create or increase awareness;
- Create or change an image;
- Respond to critics.



The American media will always be attracted to covering community association matters. Knowing how to respond to media inquiries in an organized manner is the best way to protect the value and image of your association and our industry.



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