

As Company Crises Make Headlines, Response Plans Take Priority

Last month, Equinox Fitness, the parent company of luxury fitness brands Equinox, PURE Yoga, Blink Fitness and SoulCycle, [made headlines](#) when it was reported that the company's chairman and part-owner was holding a fundraiser for President Donald Trump's reelection campaign. The chain of gyms and studios had developed a reputation for being LGBTQ friendly over the years, so it was hardly a surprise when this new development struck a chord with many of its LGBTQ members and allies, resulting in [a highly publicized boycott](#).



Jaffe Staff

What happened to Equinox is hardly unique in this age of social media, memes and hot takes. We are a highly partisan society, and people bring their politics to their consumerism. That means it's easier than ever for a firm to find itself in the middle of a crisis, which means every professional services firm needs to have some form of crisis response plan in place.

What Does a Crisis Look Like?

Picture any of the following scenarios happening at your firm, and ask yourself, "How would we respond?"

- You get a phone call late at night from firm leadership that your firm's email and file servers aren't working. Is it a server glitch or a cyberattack? You wait. A cyberattack is suspected and, soon, those fears are confirmed.
- Or another phone call late at night: Mr. Founding Partner was just arrested – for embezzlement. Talk about the worst thing a founder can do to ruin trust and integrity for himself and the firm.
- Your firm is hit with a lawsuit from a former employee or disgruntled former client.
- A major rainmaker or client leaves the firm, prompting others to do so, too. In the eyes of the public and the media, the firm is shrinking day by day.
- Perhaps you are dealing with a "professional behaving badly" situation. A high-profile employee had a public feud over Twitter or email with someone and now everyone knows. Or maybe he was arrested for lewd behavior or driving while intoxicated.

Each of these scenarios may be different, but they have one thing in common: crisis. When a crisis hits your firm, [you need to be prepared](#) with a crisis plan and crisis communications strategy for the firm and its leadership. The time to prepare is now, not when something bad happens.

How to Prepare for a Crisis

1. **Have a plan:** The best time to develop your firm's **crisis plan** is before any crisis has hit. Think through the possible scenarios and come up with a response team for each of the scenarios you envision. The response or crisis team should include firm management from a number of different areas, depending on the issue. If it is a cyberattack, you will want to include the IT director. If it involves a firm employee, you will want HR to be involved.

The firm should have a customized crisis plan and online strategy for each of these scenarios that will determine who will communicate relevant information, depending on the circumstances. In the event of a crime, for example, others outside the firm may act as representatives for certain elements of the crisis. Key messages and media statements for each scenario should be drafted and compiled in a crisis communications manual, along with step-by-step procedures of what to do.

Spokespeople for the firm should be selected and agreed upon in advance, with firm protocol for communicating to the media shared with the rest of the leadership team and the firm. Everyone in the entire firm should know who is authorized to speak – and that no one else should do so.

1. **Run through the plan:** The plan may seem solid in your head and on paper, but how does it hold up in real life? Create a real-life “fire drill” or **crisis simulation** for your firm and its leadership to ensure the plan works and that everyone knows what to do. The primary focus should not be on “getting through the simulation” but on accomplishing the firm’s objectives during the crisis. Did the right messages get communicated to the right audiences and in the right way? Did those on the response team know their roles during the crisis? When everyone understands the goals of the crisis plan, they are more likely to stick to the plan, even when a crisis puts them under pressure. Remember, while the situation may be fictional, the stakes are real.
2. **Know how to deal with the media:** Your crisis plan should make sure there is one dedicated spokesperson to communicate messages to the media. Others in the firm should know to direct media to that person so there are no conflicting reports or misinformation. That spokesperson should also know the communications parameters of what they should and should not say.
3. **Create a media playbook:** Create a basic playbook for dealing with the media (once vetted and approved by the appropriate parties), which should cover the details of what happened, a holding statement on what the firm is doing to address the crisis and a sincere apology if the firm is somehow at fault.
 - media scenarios you’ll need to be prepared for include:
 - When you don’t know the answer: Calmly tell the reporter you don’t know, and offer to find out if it’s a reasonable request.
 - When you are asked a yes or no question: Don’t feel confined to their question, and provide a bridge to bring up the point you would like to make.
 - When you are asked for your personal opinion: It’s never about your personal opinion if you represent the firm.

Remember, if media are going to cover your firm's crisis, they are going to cover it with or without your firm's input. But your involvement can help shape the story and improve your firm's image in the public eye.

Want to learn more about how to prepare for a crisis? Contact [Vivian Hood](mailto:Vivian.Hood) at vhood@jaffepr.com or 904.220.1915.