



ROTARY INTERNATIONAL®

# Media Crisis Handbook

*An effective media crisis plan is based, first and foremost, on the principles of truth, transparency, and sincerity. Nothing in your club's media crisis plan should compromise, or appear to compromise, these key principles.*



## When Reporters Call

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A Rotary club has sponsored an exchange student from another country or hosted a Group Study Exchange team. Then the student or one of the GSE team members encounters an emergency. While club leaders work with authorities and relatives to resolve the situation, the news media get wind of the crisis, and the club is suddenly bombarded with interview requests. The resulting news coverage generates more attention and raises sensitive issues within the community. This scenario is familiar to many clubs worldwide.

When this happens, Rotary clubs normally have well-established procedures for dealing with crises: they cooperate with outside authorities and show compassion for the individuals and families involved. However, handling news media can be a challenge. The following guidelines aim to show how clubs can work with the media to get timely and accurate information out to the public during a crisis situation and prevent misunderstandings and misinformation that can jeopardize Rotary's reputation.

# If a Crisis Develops

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- Convene a crisis management team. Depending on the topic, the team might consist of the president, a committee chair, an attorney, and a media professional.
- Gather all the facts.
- Provide timely briefings to all Rotary stakeholders.
- Designate a Rotary spokesperson. This should be someone who is on top of the issue, communicates well, and is comfortable interacting with the media.
- Instruct all club members to refer press inquiries to the spokesperson.
- Prepare a statement that accurately states the facts, expresses Rotary's position, and conveys the appropriate tone (sympathy, apology, commitment, etc.). Update as needed.
- Develop key messages to help the spokesperson convey Rotary's position consistently and accurately.
- Contact the RI PR Division (847-866-3245 or 847-866-3237) immediately if you think the issue could spread beyond the local press and attract the attention of regional, national, or international media.

# When the Media Contact You

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- Respond to all media calls promptly. Ignoring media can contribute to unnecessary speculation. A media interview is a good opportunity to convey the facts and Rotary's position to the public.
- If you need time to confirm or update facts or to review the club's position, tell the reporter you will call back promptly.
- Be completely honest and truthful. Don't say anything you are unsure of. Do not cover up or make excuses.
- As a spokesperson, you represent Rotary. When you speak, you ARE Rotary. Avoid personal observations or speculations.
- Monitor the media's coverage of the issue for accuracy and tone. If Rotary is misrepresented, let them know via a call or a letter to the editor (but do not be defensive or discourteous).



## Maintain the Proper Attitude during Interviews

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- Accept the fact that a reporter's job is to ask difficult questions. Remain pleasant and be as accommodating as possible.
- Organize your thoughts and speak in short, simple sentences. Think of each as a headline, supported by facts and examples. Headline: "The safety of our Youth Exchange participants is our top priority." Support: "Every student completes a detailed orientation program; background checks are required for all adults in the program; etc."
- Strengthen your main message with a personal story: "As a parent of a student who has gone on an exchange, I know what it's like to worry about a child thousands of miles away."
- If the situation involves a police investigation or other formal proceeding, emphasize that Rotary is cooperating fully.
- Control your voice tone and body language to avoid coming across as defensive, nervous, or hostile.
- Always thank the reporter for his or her time and offer to be available for follow-up questions.



## Mistakes to Avoid

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- Avoid “off-the-record” comments. If you don’t want something reported, don’t say it at all.
- Avoid rumors, speculation, and personal opinions. Stick to the facts.
- Avoid jokes, especially when dealing with serious or sensitive topics.
- Avoid Rotary jargon and acronyms (DG, GSE, RYLA, District 1234) that the general public will not understand.
- Avoid repeating the negative portion of a question. If the question is: “Did your club fail to adequately protect the student?” consider an answer such as: “The safety of the exchange students is our highest priority.”
- Avoid the term *no comment* because it can carry a negative connotation. When possible, explain why you can’t answer a particular question (“Sorry, I don’t have that information.”) or say why you cannot comment (because an official investigation is in progress; a lawsuit has been filed, etc.). Then bridge back to an important point or key message.

# Actions Speak Volumes

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Dealing with the media during a crisis can be inconvenient and unpleasant, but Rotary club leaders have a responsibility to convey the facts and protect Rotary's image. If club leaders follow the principles of honesty, transparency, and sincerity, the media and the public will recognize and appreciate the effort.

Just as important: if a club offers genuine promises and follows through to resolve whatever problems are at hand — if the club takes action and shows to the people involved that Rotary cares — it will minimize the negative impact of the crisis and protect Rotary's positive image.

## *Example*

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Recently, a Youth Exchange student from the United States was reported missing in South America, prompting an international media crisis.

Rotary clubs in both regions worked closely with law enforcement authorities and quickly offered support to the student's family. At the same time, Rotarians named a competent spokesperson in each country to handle all media inquiries promptly and with honesty, sincerity, and patience. Moreover, the clubs notified Rotary International immediately and the RI president extended his personal concerns and best wishes to the family. Fortunately, the student was found safe five days later.

Thanks to the dedication of the involved Rotarians, a negative became a positive, and Rotary's image was enhanced, not tarnished, by the wave of international publicity generated by this incident.

# Media Assistance from RI

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The Rotary Public Relations and Media Relations staff is always available to consult with and assist your club, from helping develop an initial position statement to last-minute media coaching. Contact: 847-866-3245 or 847-866-3237.



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