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CHECKLIST: PREPARING YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR MEDIA RAPID RESPONSE

Above all else, effective rapid response flows from preparation, clear lines of communication, and strategically grounded decision-making. Time spent gathering information or preparing materials is time that the media cycle is moving forward without your organization's voice. Clear lines of internal communication, meanwhile, will allow you decide what you're doing, and who is doing it, as quickly as possible. They also help avoid the friction that comes with miscommunication and the possibility that key stakeholders may not feel "heard." And a shared strategic understanding of your goals for the media cycle helps inform every decision. In most rapid response scenarios, advocates are pulled in a lot of competing directions, but time is finite. Having clear strategic goals will help you say "no" to distractions and keep your team's work focused on priority outcomes.

At core, there are also just two types of rapid response. The first is responding in an intense news cycle that you can anticipate and plan in advance for. When the day arrives, ultimately you will be either more well-prepared or less well-prepared. The second type of rapid response involves unanticipated breaking news. In these scenarios, all of the same preparation can be equally valuable and the intellectual discipline of determining strategic will be equally determinative of a successful outcome.

The following are a few categories to consider in preparing your organization for rapid response in an intense media cycle. It isn't an all-inclusive list, and not every element will necessarily apply. Different organizational and political circumstances may require you to be adaptive. But this checklist should help inform your planning.

SPOKESPEOPLE

DO YOU HAVE MULTIPLE, WELL-TRAINED, MEDIA SPOKESPEOPLE?

A few common challenges that organizations face revolve around spokespeople. If there are too few, or the role is concentrated in a single leadership figure, this will result in missed opportunities. It will also miss out on opportunities for leadership development as others are deliberately developed as spokespeople. And finally, it can lead to an over-personalization of the message.

IS THERE CLEAR SIGN-OFF AUTHORITY ESTABLISHING WHO CAN APPROVE ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENTS IF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR IS UNREACHABLE?

Time waits for no one and your primary spokespeople may not be available. We've seen crises unfold while Directors were at reunions, or visiting in-laws, or overseas. Crossed signals on who needs to be consulted can lead to internal friction. It's important to determine lines of authority.

DO YOU HAVE PREPARED STATEMENTS BASED ON OUTCOMES CAN YOU FORESEE?

It's a best practice to prepare your priority press lists and draft statements in advance. In a breaking news environment some targeted reporters may reach out for an interview, but you can be certain to provide all targeted reporters with your statement, positioning yourself early as a source and improving your odds that they'll include your organization's voice.

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- DO YOU HAVE A PLAN FOR YOUR SPOKESPEOPLE TO TAKE BRIEF BREAKS AS NEEDED TO RECALIBRATE MESSAGES AND SHARE INTEL ON EMERGING NARRATIVES?**

In a very intense news cycle, spokespeople can become entirely absorbed (and exhausted). Make a plan to step back every hour or two to compare notes, brief on new developments, and recalibrate priority messages as necessary.

- DO YOU HAVE AGREED UPON TOP-LINE MESSAGES GROUNDED IN ANTICIPATED SCENARIOS?**

Elections, court rulings and other news cycles have predictable elements. You may not know the outcome but still likely know what you want the narrative to emphasize in different scenarios. Game out how you will most effectively deliver the message you want in each of the scenarios you can anticipate.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

- DO YOU HAVE A “TRIAGE” PLAN FOR MANAGING AND PRIORITIZING IN-BOUND PRESS CALLS AS WELL AS FOR MANAGING OUTBOUND MEDIA ENGAGEMENT PRIORITIES?**

Not all reporters or outlets are equally valuable. And answering emails or fielding phone calls from some may detract from reaching others. It’s a best practice to have someone “on point” for fielding calls, and managing the best use of your spokespeople’s time.

- DO YOU HAVE AN ESTABLISHED INTERNAL SYSTEM FOR REPORTING CRITICAL INFORMATION WHILE EXCLUDING NON-CRITICAL INFORMATION?**

In most breaking news scenarios there is a certain amount of reporting that is incorrect or misleading, or both. When our own team is in crisis management mode, we typically assign one person to track breaking news developments, determine which are verified and which are important, and report those developments back to the team. This is a good role for someone who is not a spokesperson, but who understands your strategic goals.

- IS YOUR COMMUNICATION PLAN INTEGRATED WITH YOUR DEVELOPMENT PLAN? ARE YOU SET UP TO COMMUNICATE TO YOUR SUPPORTERS IN REAL TIME AND GIVE THEM OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT YOUR WORK?**

Your supporters contribute to your organization because they care about, and share, your goals. Sometimes they may want to share their ideas, but almost always, they’ll want to know what you are doing to respond to the crisis. Be proactive. Plan on sending a quick “update” within the most immediate 24 hours and reporting on your work. Donors will appreciate being included and hearing the “inside story” and providing updates will help them feel a part of the solution.

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DO YOU HAVE A LIST OF ALLIES/PARTNERS THAT YOU CAN CALL TO ASSIST IN DEPLOYING THE RAPID RESPONSE PLAN?

It's one thing to have allies, and another to have them prepped to support your goals in a critical time. Every organization will know their own unique circumstances best, but reaching out in advance to your most consequential allies and sharing your goals can be enormously valuable. Press statements from influential allies, for example the local faith community, can help shape the narrative to your desired ends.

DO YOU HAVE A PLAN FOR MANAGING NON-MEDIA INQUIRIES AND/OR OFFERS OF HELP THAT MIGHT NORMALLY REQUIRE SENIOR-LEVEL ATTENTION, BUT THAT MAY DISTRACT FROM PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS?

Oftentimes, in a crisis, Board members, major donors, or significant political allies will reach out to offer help, but managing those important relationships can take time away from media engagement. Designating a senior staff person or Board member to field those calls can help keep your rapid response plan on task.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

DO YOU HAVE UP-TO-DATE PRESS LISTS OF BREAKING NEWS DESKS/REPORTERS?

Every news outlets has someone assigned to "breaking news." These may be editors who assign reporters or reporters who do not cover a single "beat" or issue. For breaking news it is imperative to have an up-to-date press list of these journalists. They need to get updates, organizational statements, and in the case of TV, they need to get updates on good visuals that may help drive your narrative.

DO YOU HAVE UP-TO-DATE PRESS LISTS OF CRITICAL "BEAT" REPORTERS?

"Beat" reporters have more in-depth issue knowledge. While the contraction of the media means fewer "beat" reporters are out there, with predictable news cycles you should be able to determine who will be covering the story at priority outlets. Make sure your press is 100% up to date and don't rely on an old list. Usually there will also be reporters who have been assigned to a story, but new to you. Have someone on your team track coverage in real time and continuously update your list.

IS YOUR LEADERSHIP STAFF ON A FIRST NAME BASIS WITH YOUR TOP PRIORITY JOURNALISTS?

The single best way for your organization to be quoted and for you to drive your narrative is to be well known to the journalists who will drive the story. Yours should be one of the first names they think of. That means that the months leading up to a predictable news cycle are the months to execute a strategy of personal outreach. A simple introductory phone call, or video chat, or a meeting over coffee can make all the difference and most journalists are interested in developing sources. Ask ReThink for tips on how to make these meetings happen.

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DO YOU HAVE A PLAN TO PITCH “DAY TWO” STORIES/ANGLES ON VOTING RIGHTS IN THE ELECTION?

In the immediate moment, the question of who won and who lost will dominate. But this will be followed by questions of who did and didn't vote, what the election said about your community, and what the trends portend. Prepare your organization to quickly frame these secondary stories that address systems of inclusion and exclusion.

WILL YOU BE READY WITH “PLUG AND PLAY” OP-EDS THAT CAN BE ADAPTED AND PITCHED WITHIN 1-2 HOURS OF POLLS CLOSING? DO YOU HAVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ASSOCIATED OP-ED EDITORS?

Editors will have a vacuum to fill with immediate commentary and reflection. Getting these soonest requires planning. Consider the right angles for your organization and your message. Consider the most impactful and persuasive messengers. And reach out to op-ed editors, in advance, offering them rapid response commentaries.

ARE YOU PREPARED TO DO VIDEO INTERVIEWS FROM YOUR OFFICE? OR RECORD A MESSAGE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA?

Even before the global pandemic, news outlets were increasingly doing interviews via Zoom, Google Hangout, and Skype because it's cost efficient and provides them access to a wider range of guests. Make sure you have a room available, that's not too noisy and with an appropriate background. Alternatively, have one of your spokespeople record a short, simple, and on-message commentary and then push out the video with your social channels.

SOCIAL MEDIA

DO YOU HAVE TWITTER LISTS FOR KEY STATE AND LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND A SYSTEM/PLAN FOR MONITORING THEIR COVERAGE?

Twitter is the single best way to interact with reporters in real time and help shape their coverage of breaking events. Make sure you have a Twitter list of the reporters you want to reach. Be sure to engage the conversation and don't just lurk. Provide links to resources and refer them to sources.

DO YOU HAVE TWITTER LISTS FOR KEY STATE AND NATIONAL JOURNALISTS AND A SYSTEM/PLAN FOR MONITORING THEIR COVERAGE.

If your scenario is purely local, then the Twitter engagement described above will suffice, but if your situation is a potential national story then you'll need to engage the journalists that drive the national conversation. Just as above, be sure to actively engage the conversation and position yourself as a potential source.

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DO YOU HAVE PRELIMINARY TWITTER HASHTAGS TO COORDINATE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGE.

It can take a lot of time and diplomacy to get groups in your state or region to agree on a basic hashtag to drive your Twitter engagement, but a unified hashtag can make all the difference when it comes to breaking through the noise and trending. When groups all adopt their own, they are divided against themselves with regard to reaching the public. Take the time, well in advance, to work out agreed-upon hashtags with your allies.

ARE YOU PREPARED TO ALIGN YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA – PAUSING SCHEDULED POSTS AND MAKING SURE MESSAGING IS GOING OUT ON YOUR ACCOUNTS AND LINKING TO ANY RESOURCES AND MEDIA ENGAGEMENT?

Sometimes groups have pre-planned or scheduled posts. Be sure that these are not tonally in conflict with the breaking news. Equally important, make sure that someone is monitoring your organization's social media accounts and reporting any feedback, emerging trends, etc. so that your spokespeople are aware of what's going on in that feedback loop.

DO YOU HAVE PLANS TO CAPTURE AND PUBLICIZE VIDEO, AS NEEDED, OF ANY POLLING IRREGULARITIES?

In a world of Facebook Live and other livestreaming platforms, your organization is potentially positioned to report on the news in real time. Changed polling places, long lines, voter intimidation tactics, and direct voter commentaries all lend themselves to video that you can potentially amplify via Twitter, and from there, bootstrap into national stories.