

PLAYBOOK:

## How to Handle Negative Publicity in Texas

The sheer size and diversity of opinion in Texas means negative press is part of the cost of doing business here. You have to be prepared to take your shots. When you get knocked down, you need the strength and determination to get back up again.

No matter your project, campaign or initiative, Texas media coverage will run the gamut. Stories and opinion pieces will range from ringing endorsements to accurate, fair and balanced to complete hatchet jobs and one-sided attacks.

Texas media outlets are diverse politically, professionally and ethically. Some journalists will go to great lengths to give you a fair shake. Others might not bother asking for your side. Still, others will be dead-set against whatever you're doing and hit you with a one-two punch.

Having a plan and an experienced advisor who knows the Texas media landscape and how to navigate it can help you overcome the challenges of engaging with the media. This resource lays out key steps and strategies for handling negative media coverage in Texas.



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## What is Bad Press, Really?

It's helpful to first dispel some misconceptions and explain what actually isn't bad press or bad publicity.

Bad press is not when media coverage includes a viewpoint that opposes yours. That's just fair reporting. There are at least two sides to every story. Reporters (the good ones) have an obligation to include a variety of perspectives. It may not be what you want to read, but it doesn't mean it's bad press.

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Bad press is also not when someone says something ugly about you. That's just a fact of life, especially in today's digital age. The anonymity and reach of social media means anybody anywhere can say something unflattering, and someone will always take that opportunity. Again, it's uncomfortable and unfortunate, but it doesn't amount to bad press.

Truly bad press has the potential to cause harm to your company's reputation or derail a project or initiative. We have found that genuinely bad press typically falls into one of these categories:

- ★ **Reporter bias or outlet bias.** Some bad stories are simply the result of a reporter or media outlet with a personal beef. They will oppose a project or campaign and whoever is behind it, motivated and guided by their own agenda.
- ★ **Inaccurate or non-factual information.** This is less malicious but potentially just as damaging. If a reporter is relying on information or talking points that are flat-out wrong, their coverage is likely to drive a false narrative and create confusion.

- ★ **A basic misunderstanding of the facts of a complicated situation.** Some subjects are particularly nuanced and difficult to distill. If a reporter doesn't have a strong understanding of the issues in play, they can't relay the full picture to their audience.
- ★ **Headlines.** Often, a reporter can write a fair and balanced piece but the headline used to promote the story is sensationalized for clicks and reader attention. The headline has tremendous power to negatively influence your perspective and ability to convey an accurate message. Worth noting, reporters don't dictate these, their editors do.

Fortunately, there are strategies for dealing with each of these bad press scenarios. And every bad press instance creates an opportunity to avoid future occurrences.

## **Catch Your Breath. Bad News is Temporary.**

You might feel like your bout of bad press is a bona fide End Times situation. You worry about the future of your business, the failure of your initiative or even the implosion of your career.

**STOP. Take a beat.** We appreciate your emotion on this matter and expect you to respond no differently. But let's have a conversation about who read or watched the coverage, how they interpreted it and how it could impact reaching your goals. We're not discrediting the story or discounting what you're feeling. What we're saying is we need to analyze the actual impact.

When something is published, the damage is done. But the news cycle in America is QUICK and new stories are generated constantly. How quickly can you repair or correct the situation? You can't erase a negative story from the internet along with any comments or followup coverage that comes from it. It's an uncontrollable beast.

If somebody tells you they can make it all go away or put a sheet over it, they're likely wrong or uninformed, and they could easily make the situation worse.

What you need is a partner working closely by your side who can take an objective look at the environment in which the coverage is being generated, who is engaging with the story, what they took away, and evaluate the resulting optics. You need someone who can help you separate yourself from the issue for a moment.

The subject of the coverage will naturally be hyper-sensitive, but how compelling is the story to average readers? To what extent have you been singled out? What is the potential for additional coverage? How relevant is it to other markets or publications?

We often have to counsel clients back from the ledge. This is not the time or forum for overly emotional reactions. You need to operate in reality with focus.

## **Resist the Urge to Punch Back. Respond With Facts.**

It's natural to want to fight back when you've taken a hit in the press. But knee-jerk reactions won't generate the desired outcome. Instead, they're more likely to fan the flames and invite further negative coverage. The media love to cover a good back-and-forth fight.

A stronger strategy is to present facts to counter whatever argument is being made. People who oppose your project have a license to say almost anything. With no obligation to learn or tell the truth, opponents will muddy the water and confuse an issue to kill a project or turn public opinion.

Respond with overwhelming information and fact-based presentations to generate support for your position.



## **Keep Calm and Carry On**

When bad news hits, you need a partner working closely by your side who can take an objective look at the environment in which the coverage is being generated. This is not the time or forum for overly emotional reactions.

## **Lock Down The Team and Pick a Leader**

When you're in the maelstrom of negative publicity, you need to choose your team carefully. And the tighter the circle the better. There's a reason ships have captains, not councils.

You don't need to include every member of your executive, legal, communications and project management teams. That's bloated and inefficient when managing rapid news cycles.

Instead, handpick a small working group to develop a strategy and then present options to a point person who becomes the final decision maker. Group decisions can lead to inefficiency, rabbit trails, never-ending editing processes and internal discord.

## **Know How Your Team Processes Bad Press**

When formulating a strategy, it's essential to understand how different levels of your organization will respond to bad press:

- ★ Your communications people generally want to come in, find a solution, draw a roadmap to get out of it, and devise a plan to prevent it in the future or to rectify what just occurred.
- ★ Your legal team is often looking for the nearest off-ramp. They just want it to go away. Perhaps if they're mad enough, they might want to try to sue or send a nasty letter.
- ★ Differing personalities among your CEO and board members generate different responses. Some might feel very protective of the organization and believe the best approach is full speed ahead, take it straight on, even if it's not worth engaging. Others will focus only on stock value or sales impact.
- ★ Others executives might be hesitant or intimidated by a media environment they feel they can't control. And because they feel like they can't control it, they are unwilling to take a public position.



- ★ When it comes to your shareholders or board of directors, do they know it could have been worse? Will they appreciate the fact that they already knew about the dirty laundry because you've been at the table with them since day one?

However your team reacts to bad press, the most important focus should be on the audiences who matter most to the organization or initiative and the need for them to hear from you, either through the media or alternative channels so you can chart a path forward.

## **Preparation is Critical**

If The Monument Group has an ongoing relationship with you, there's a really good chance we identified early warning signs and we've already braced for impact by learning your issue back and forth and preparing. To respond in a way that minimizes damage.

When the story hits, we are forensically analyzing it, layer by layer, comment by comment. We analyze the reporter's history with the issue. We identify the stakeholders. We familiarize ourselves with our opponents' messaging and position. We're exploring ways to come out the other side stronger than before.

We often take the opportunity to communicate directly with the reporter. And if we are speaking from the position of authority, then we can insert facts and perspective into a story immediately. We may even be able to drive a follow up that includes details missing from the original coverage.

## **Keep Your Messaging Simple**

Complicated or ambitious initiatives can be more vulnerable to negative publicity. The more complicated the issue, the easier it will be for opponents to attack and gain wider and more vocal opposition. And the more complex your issue is, the more difficult it will be to explain it in a way that generates the benefit of the doubt in your favor. Simplifying your message and supplementing it with facts can deter or deflect negative coverage.



### **Keep It Simple**

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Your message must be succinct and focused on the aspects of a story that are most compelling to readers. Understand what's relevant. Don't be tone deaf. What may appear vitally important to you could be completely detached from the reporting.

## **When “Unavailable For Comment” Is Better Than No Comment**

Today's rapid news environment means reporters are under pressure to move quickly.

**Just because the press is calling doesn't mean you have to make yourself available or respond on the record.**

Most reporters endeavor to include your viewpoint in a potentially damaging story. Their editors often insist on it, and their audience will want to know what you have to say.

But just because the press is calling doesn't mean you have to make yourself available or respond on the record.

Recognize the potential outcomes of speaking to the press. Sometimes choking off a reporter's access is the best way to see a story ultimately killed. Their editor might say, “You can't run this until you've spoken to them on the record.”

## **Own Up If You Messed Up**

There may be times when the bad publicity is your own doing. If you truly messed up, you need to own the mistake. And evasion often leads to follow up stories that persist until you do.

Simple, genuine honesty can help turn the page and will often buy more goodwill than the most ambitious crisis management plan.

If you are truly in the wrong, deflecting, denying or delaying will

only aggravate the situation. If you screwed up and somebody is owed an apology, then apologize.

If you don't own your narrative with authority, somebody else will, and you might not like what they have to say.

## **The Right Strategy for Handling Negative Publicity Requires Trusted, Experienced Guidance**

We've been around the block, and we have helped clients navigate some unusual, difficult, and often unique situations. We can help you, too.

The Monument Group has the experience and contacts to help you successfully navigate through choppy media waters. We design realistic road maps, tell it like it is, and guide you every step of the way. Working with the media is a relationship business and we embrace that approach.

**Let's talk.**



Navigating the Diverse Texas Landscape  
to Earn Public Trust & Market Share

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