

How to Combat Negative Publicity During COVID-19

Labor & Employment Law Update

By Ryan Jacobson on September 9, 2020

With the prevalence of online consumer reviews and merciless labor organizations, companies and their executives are vulnerable to attack for good reason, bad reason or no reason at all. Managing the expectations of your consumers, and of your workforce, is an important place to start. Executives who identify the problem and work diligently to arrive at viable solutions will gain a head start toward preserving the status quo. Media coverage will no doubt accelerate the harm; it is never too late to challenge the story line with a well-crafted statement from the company president or outside counsel. Companies should be prepared to act swiftly and trust their network of advisors to preserve the reputation it took them decades to build.

To illustrate, a company who suffers the loss of an employee to COVID-19 may have to refute unsupported allegations that the victim was infected on the job and counter fears that other workers were exposed. That may lead to the assumption that the company is unwilling to invest in personal protective equipment, or it was otherwise lax in its sanitization procedures – all of which may be patently false. Any related news coverage may likewise impact the company's image with its customers.

The best way to combat this unexpected publicity is to tackle the problem head-on. Make it clear that the safety and health of your employees at work is a top priority. Instead of unhinging each blade of the rumor mill, explain that fear leads to assumptions, and those assumptions interfere with your ability to message the rigorous safety measures the organization has employed to keep its workforce and their families safe.

Explain that these are unprecedented times. That you are doing your best to research and comply with the guidelines put out by local, state and federal agencies considered experts in the field. Be specific and stand firmly behind the authorities you have relied upon, and the steps you have taken to rectify the problem. Alert those concerned that you are routinely monitoring the situation and staying abreast of any changes in the law or recommended best practices. Do not speak generically of your plan; rather, draft a comprehensive, safety protocol with a cover letter to your workforce summarizing the key measures undertaken. Consider providing to the probing reporter a copy of the protocol to demonstrate his source spared some of the key details. It will also reinforce that your organization had a plan in place before the story broke.

Ultimately, everyone wants to be 'heard,' which means repeating the concern and explaining the steps the business has taken to reconcile the perceived problem. Debating each false accusation lets the accuser control the narrative. Clear up any material misunderstanding but focus your response (or press release) on the efforts it has (or will) undertake to correct the problem. Use this opportunity to educate the misinformed and instill confidence in the detractors that you have the situation under control.

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