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MISTAKES HAPPEN...

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Whether it's a typo or a piece of research that's gone awry, what should PR professionals do to protect their own reputation? Sebastian St John-Clarke takes a look.

Picture the scene: you have been working on a press release for a big corporate client for a number of weeks. At last, numerous drafts later, the release has been signed off and it's ready to go. The distribution list, for both online and newsprint targets, has been freshly manicured and you're in good time to catch the press dates of those key publications. What could possibly go wrong?

Button pressed, the release is sent on its merry way and all seems well, until the dreaded call. The client phones and is furious that the release sent out was an earlier draft, not the signed off version. It gets worse: not only did the release go out complete with incorrect information as well as some embarrassing typos but it was also sent a day early. Welcome to a PR nightmare.

Despite everyone's best intentions, mistakes like these do happen and when they do, a PR agency can be left facing not only the volcanic ire of their client but also potential financial liabilities from legal action, compensation claims, or a simple refusal to pay fees. Ian Birdsey, media expert for specialist insurer [Hiscox](#), comments:

We have seen insurance claims from practitioners who have inadvertently sent out press releases with mistakes or have sent out a release a day early risking not only the client's displeasure but also possible action from their client's regulator and trade body.

The double-edged news hook

The risk of something going wrong increases as competition for news coverage grows and PR practitioners look to be even more imaginative in their news creation.

Hiscox's Ian Birdsey again:

Commissioned research is obviously at the core of many a campaign as PR professionals look to get their client's name out there with a creative news hook. One risk here is your client's reputation. When you put out a release announcing a new trend based on findings, your research had better be water tight. What if the sample size is too small or a journalist starts questioning the research methodology? You can risk looking less credible and your client could have their own expertise undermined.

Note that the CIPR has published [guidelines](#) on using statistics in communications.

The rampant growth of social media has also opened up a whole new Pandora's Box of risk, adds Birdsey:

Many companies have started to outsource their Twitter feeds, Facebook pages or blogs which, in turn, can mean a greater risk of inadvertently defaming someone or simply making inaccurate statements. Of course, the immediacy of the communication should not mean that processes and procedures for proper sign-off are any less rigorous than they are for a traditional press release for example, but the sheer prolificacy of output inevitably raises the potential for accidents to happen when shortcuts are taken.

Note that the CIPR has published [guidance](#) on the use of social media in communications.

Keep good records

Even when the PR agency has jumped through all the right sign-off hoops, whether it's online or offline content, things can still go wrong.

Birdsey comments:

They can be dragged into litigation even if a client has signed off a document so it is essential that the paper trail of records is comprehensive, accurate and retained. It is critical that any PR operation takes time to review their own procedures and ensures a good level of risk management.

A checklist of actions recommended by Hiscox includes:

- make sure the final sign-off for all documentation has been received from your client
- keep good records of all your conversations and correspondence so that you can produce a paper trail. Follow up a phone call or a meeting with an email summary
- review your own internal procedures for version control
- make sure you are properly insured – professional indemnity cover protects you in the event of a client accusing you of negligence or, perhaps more likely, breach of contract.

Reputation, reputation, reputation

If you are unfortunate enough to suffer from a claim against you or your agency, or expect to receive a complaint, get your insurer involved at the earliest stage says Ian Birdsey:

In many cases any possible legal action can be nipped in the bud and compromises agreed before solicitors are engaged. Not only will early action help prevent an escalation of legal costs, it may well save the future relationship and, just as importantly, your reputation.

Hiscox recently launched a [partnership with the CIPR](#) in which members get a 10% discount on their insurance.

[Sebastian St John-Clarke](#) is a freelance writer and communications consultant at [Paper Plane Communications](#).

Comments
