



## BEXLEY AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND THE CITY OF BEXLEY

Bexley, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, is known for its historic and close-knit neighborhoods, highly ranked public school system, classic and walkable Main Street environment, and prestigious private schools. The Bexley Area Chamber of Commerce promotes, advocates for, and fosters business and community growth for the City of Bexley.

### BUSINESS CHALLENGE

In March 2015, the City of Bexley and the Bexley Area Chamber of Commerce became embroiled in a very public national debate. A Bexley videographer, citing personal reasons, refused to video a same-sex wedding. The couple quickly took to social media, sparking criticism of the Chamber and the City for failing to have a non-discrimination policy in place regarding sexual orientation. As is often the case in a highly charged, rapidly evolving crisis, a good deal of misinformation was distributed. Within 24 hours, the Chamber and the City were under fire from both local and national media. Concerned about public perception, negative publicity, the loss of credibility, and negative effect on membership, they retained Team Fleisher Communications for immediate crisis management.

### TEAM FLEISHER COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

In order to implement an effective strategy, Team Fleisher needed to know how the City and Chamber intended to address the controversy. We learned that, in fact, both the City and Chamber planned to adopt legislation to make discrimination based on sexual orientation illegal. We realized that this crisis could be used as an opportunity for the City and Chamber to be recognized as forward-thinking leaders in the pursuit of civil rights for everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. Our strategy focused on this action, which effectively changed the narrative and tone of the coverage that followed.

#### Elements of the Campaign included:

1. Team Fleisher drafted the Chamber's 'official' response—conveying the facts, correcting misinformation, and outlining the action to be taken—and posted it to the Chamber website. It was also distributed through social media channels, and sent electronically to the entire Chamber membership.
2. Media training was conducted for representatives of both the Chamber and the City regarding ways to deliver the key messages clearly and on point.



## TEAM FLEISHER COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY (CONT.)

3. The 'official' response, along with personalized pitches, was forwarded to both local and national reporters, many of whom had covered the story initially.
4. Team Fleisher amplified key messages via social media channels and quickly corrected the rumors and falsehoods that were being perpetuated. Social media posts were created for both the City and Chamber to convey the action being taken. In addition, we monitored online discussions in order to correct misinformation and dissipate the inflammatory nature of some of the comments.
5. We worked directly with the ACLU, the mayor and an attorney specializing in civil rights to reach out to the couple that had been denied services in order to form a united front moving forward.
6. Team Fleisher assisted the City in organizing public meetings for Bexley residents so they understood the situation and the steps that were being taken to remedy it. These meetings were covered by the media and provided the ideal platform for the highly emotional community to be heard.

## RESULTS

- Within one day of implementing our tactics and strategy, the tone of the news coverage began to shift. Instead of focusing on what happened, stories reflected the action the City and Chamber planned to take.
- Far fewer critical comments were posted on social media (posts were averaging dozens a day), and they became more focused on giving the City and Chamber the time to evaluate the situation and move forward with real intent and purpose.
- Media outreach to reporters who had initially covered the story resulted in further coverage that was far more positive and applauded the direction the City and Chamber were headed. Most stories emphasized the leadership role they were taking in implementing anti-discrimination measures.
- The City's public meetings were effective in relaying progress to the general public and as a sounding board for those in the community who had been impacted by this crisis. The meetings reinforced the impression of Bexley as an open and welcoming community, and reunited a community that had, to some extent, been shaken by the crisis.
- The couple that caused the initial controversy was receptive to the personal approach by the ACLU and mayor, and gratified that their case was being taken very seriously and would result in real changes.
- The Chamber, initially worried about the impact on its membership, only lost one member, and actually gained some new ones. This was a significant indicator that the crisis had been averted and that the Chamber was still recognized as a credible and reputable organization to join.
- Three months after the crisis, the City Council of Bexley voted to pass a non-discrimination ordinance. The action came after public comments almost universally supported the ordinance. The City had used this "crisis" to come together to stand against discrimination.

Ben Kessler, Mayor of Bexley: **"Team Fleisher provided critical assistance when the City of Bexley and the Bexley Area Chamber of Commerce became the center of a sensitive claim against a Bexley business that received national coverage. Marcy and her team were able to quickly assist with messaging and managing press and social media expectations. Thanks to the depth of skill and expertise in the team, the City was able to proactively address concerns and send a strong message that Bexley is a community that celebrates and embraces diversity."**

