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News

NAACP backtracks on 'racist' stand, plus how not to get 'snookered'

NAACP blamed Fox News and Breitbart.com for their original stance against a US Agriculture Dept. official in Georgia who was fired this week because of what at first appeared to be 'racist' comments in a clip of her address at a local NAACP event in March.

NAACP president Benjamin Jealous has apologized publicly to fired USDA official Shirley Sherrod for the association's initial response to the clip, first published by Brietbart.com. NAACP had condemned as 'racist' the statements by Sherrod, who is African-American, that she did not completely aid a white farmer 24 years ago. The full 43-minute address was released a day later, showing Sherrod was attempting to describe how she overcame her own biases and ended up helping the farmer. That farmer's wife has supported Sherrod in the media fracas over the clip.

Conservative media outlets and bloggers had called on the NAACP to comment on the initial clip, following the passage of a "Tea Party" resolution the group passed last week. (See [NAACP: Resolution is going through process, 7/15](#)).

"We have come to the conclusion we were snookered by Fox News and Tea Party activist Andrew Breitbart into believing [Sherrod] had harmed white farmers because of racial bias," Jealous said. "Next time we are confronted by a racial controversy broken by Fox News or their allies in the Tea Party, like Mr. Breitbart, we will consider the source and be more deliberate in responding."

"In this age of 24-hour TV news, ubiquitous social media, and easy access to video and photo editing tools, we must all be vigilant to thwart out-of-context news reports," said public relations expert Al Rickard, president, Association Vision, Chantilly VA. "Unfortunately, there is no way to completely prevent these problems because the words one blogger said in response to this situation – 'Give me ten words of an honest man and I can hang him' - are likely true."

Rickard offered these tips for associations to avoid media snafus:

Avoid writing or speaking any phrases that could be used out of context. Make points directly and concisely in ways that are absolutely clear, especially on controversial topics. Remember that most video clips used in news stories are five seconds or less.

Monitor keywords on Google, other online search engines, and/or paid media monitoring services to quickly spot news or comments about your association that may be misinterpreted or taken out of context. Ask staff and members to also report any negative stories to the association communication staff.

Act quickly to counter negative press or social media, but research every situation thoroughly. If you hear or see something that looks damaging, find out how and why it occurred and respond accordingly. Don't lose your cool and

say something in the heat of the moment you might later regret.

“Does all this limit the art of storytelling, the memorable sound bite, and risk making communications too bland? Perhaps. It also takes time to monitor everything. But the tradeoff is a higher level of risk for association leaders and others in the public eye,” Rickard said.

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