

# Oxy, Art, and Die-Ins: An Arts Organization Responds to Accusations of Dirty Donation Money

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this case is to help students learn how to communicate a difficult decision during a time of crisis. Students are placed in the role of the leader of a premier cultural art institution who must respond when a prominent donor becomes tainted by scandal and allegations of “dirty money.” Specifically, this case examines the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s communicative responses when called upon by stakeholders to disavow gifts from the Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma, the marketers of OxyContin. Students will determine and evaluate critical communication goals and strategies that will enable the Museum to manage both its reputation and its relationships.

**Keywords:** crisis communication; image repair; public relations; museum management, nonprofit management.

## 1. Introduction

Activists lay on the floor as though dead, amidst priceless works of art, while 100 fellow demonstrators threw pill bottles into the famed moat around an ancient Egyptian temple. This was the scene in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City during a 2019 protest staged by Nan Goldin, an artist and recovering opioid addict. The group was protesting the Museum’s acceptance of money from the Sackler family, the makers and aggressive marketers of the highly addictive prescription painkiller OxyContin.

The protest highlighted the extremely difficult situation faced by Daniel Weiss, president and chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met, one of the world’s largest and finest art museums, had relied on philanthropic support for its success since its earliest roots in 1866 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). One of the Museum’s most prominent and generous donors, the Sackler family, had given the Museum millions of dollars over the past 50 years. In fact, an entire wing in the Museum and eight other exhibition spaces bore the family’s name.

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The Sackler family, however, who owned Purdue Pharma, faced growing public outrage and nationwide litigation for their role in the opioid crisis. Respected institutions across the globe supported by Sackler wealth faced calls to end their relationship with the family and its philanthropy. Some institutions began to distance themselves from the Sackler family by returning gifts, making public statements, and/or removing the Sackler name from their premises. Dozens of other arts and educational institutions around the world continued to prominently display the Sackler name and appeared to have been watching to see how the Met would react (Keefe 2021). All eyes were on the Met after their Board of Trustees received a letter from 75 high-profile artists demanding removal of the Sackler name from its exhibitions (Cascone 2021).

## **2. Dirty Money**

A previously honored benefactor, like the Sackler family, who has become socially unacceptable because of a scandal is referred to as a “tainted donor”. Similarly, “tainted money” means that funds for donations may come from socially unacceptable or illegal sources (Dunn 2010). Neither ill-gotten gains nor donors tainted by scandal are new phenomena; over the past several decades, concerns have been raised about how mega-donors like magnate John D. Rockefeller, publisher Robert Maxwell, and banker and convicted felon Charles Keating made their fortunes, while recent controversies over contributions from British fascists Oswald and Max Mosely and sex offenders like Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, and Bill Cosby are reminders of the challenges presented by tainted donations. In this era of increased media attention and heightened scrutiny, attention to donors’ actions and sources of wealth has put additional pressures on nonprofit organizations.

Art museums and galleries, like other nonprofit organizations, increasingly rely on philanthropic donations. Some would argue that financially strapped arts organizations cannot afford to be picky about a patron’s sources of wealth (Moynihan 2017). There are very few foundations who have the ability and commitment to make large-scale gifts to arts organizations on a consistent basis (Gompertz 2019). “There really aren’t that many people who are giving to art and giving to museums, in fact it’s a very small club,” said Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (Harris 2019).

Additionally, if a museum or gallery has already spent a gift, they could be bankrupted if they later decide to return that gift. Nonprofits must consider financial, legal, and moral obligations when a donor has become tainted (Sherwin 2019). For example, gift agreements awarding naming rights for major donors that do not include an “out” clause may prevent an organization from removing a donor’s name from a building, program, or fund (Kashner 2011).