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Communicating in a Crisis:

Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials

2002

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Rockville, MD

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I. PREFACE

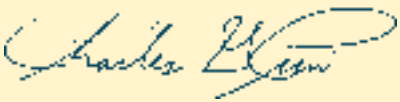
The tragedies of September 11, 2001 and the emerging threat of bioterrorism have reemphasized the need for public officials to communicate effectively with the public and the media to deliver messages that inform without frightening and educate without provoking alarm.

The purpose of this primer is to provide a resource for public officials on the basic tenets of effective communications generally and on working with the news media specifically. The primer is not encyclopedic in nature, but rather an easy-to-use pocket guide on the basic skills and techniques needed for clear, effective communications, information dissemination, and message delivery.

Its content focuses on providing public officials with a brief orientation and perspective on the media and how they think and work, and on the public as the end-recipient of information; concise presentations of techniques for responding to and cooperating with the media in conveying information and delivering messages, before, during, and after a public health crisis; a practical guide to the tools of the trade of media relations and public communications; and strategies and tactics for addressing the probable opportunities and the possible challenges that are likely to arise as a consequence of such communications initiatives.

Although this primer identifies principles relevant to and consistent with effective risk communication

practices, it is neither the definitive nor the final word on the subject. Differing circumstances may raise unique questions that must be dealt with in unique ways. And while this primer cannot provide you with all the answers, it can prepare you to make the decisions that will lead you to effective answers.



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II. INTRODUCTION

1. COMMUNICATIONS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A CRISIS SITUATION

Sound and thoughtful risk communication can assist public officials in preventing ineffective, fear-driven, and potentially damaging public responses to serious crises such as unusual disease outbreaks and bio-terrorism. Moreover, appropriate risk communication procedures foster the trust and confidence that are vital in a crisis situation (Covello et al., 2001; Maxwell, 1999). There are steps public officials can take in advance of any incident to better prepare communities, risk managers, government spokespersons, public health officials, the news media, physicians, and hospital personnel to respond to the challenges of managing such crises (O'Toole, 2001). Plan for communicating to the public and the news media by asking yourself the following questions:

- What information is crucial to convey in initial messages in order to prompt appropriate public responses after a crisis situation?

- What are the messages to be delivered prior to, during, and after an incident?
- What are the obstacles to effective communications and how can they be minimized?

> ***RISK COMMUNICATION**: An interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions; often involves multiple messages about the nature of risk or expressing concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management.*

- What are the opportunities for effective communications and how can they be maximized?
- What questions can we anticipate from the public in these risk situations?
- What are the news media's responsibilities and how can you help reporters meet them?

2. FIRST DO NO HARM

The cardinal rule of risk communication is the same as that for emergency medicine: first do no harm. A threatening or actual crisis often poses a volatile equation of public action and reaction.

This destabilized information environment makes it very important that you give thought to what it is you are about to say before making any public comment—be it a 30-second statement to a news person or a 30-minute news conference to a roomful of media representatives. In preparing for this speaking opportunity:

- Assess the environment into which you are introducing information. Gain a sense of the public's general attitude toward the situation and tailor your presentation accordingly. Are they worried and in need of reassurance? Are they sanguine and in need of a warning? Are they angry and in need of calming?

> *Crisis + heightened public emotions + limited access to facts + rumor, gossip, speculation, assumption, and inference = an unstable information environment.*

- Review your remarks to gauge the probable impact that your words will have on the situation and adjust them as necessary; e.g., are you using words, like "crisis," "life-threatening," or "extremely" and can other, less dramatic words be substituted?

- Understand your audience. If it is a reporter, appreciate the demands and constraints under which reporters work and recognize the risks those constraints pose to you as a communicator.

Photo by FEMA

- Don't speak unless you are comfortable doing so. Most communications mistakes are made by those who are not prepared to speak but feel compelled to do so anyway. If confronted with a demand for a quick answer, have the confidence to say, "I would like to answer that question later."

- Don't assume you're not in need of help, and don't be shy about asking for it. Always take advantage of whatever professional communications

The middle of a looming crisis is not the occasion to say "No comment." "No comment" should almost never be used by a public speaker, particularly in a risk communications situation. The phrase suggests a lack of candor, conveys a sense of secrecy and connotes that you know something that you are either not willing or not allowed to share with the public, creating skepticism and mistrust.

support is available to you. If you have access to a public affairs office, use it. You can also hire a local public relations consultant or ask a corporate public relations executive to volunteer to help you meet your challenges.

- Watch, read, and listen to the news; analyze how it is presented; critique the communications skills of others; learn from their successes as well as from their mistakes.

III. COMMUNICATIONS FUNDAMENTALS

1. DEVELOPING GOALS AND KEY MESSAGES

People often fail to effectively communicate due to a lack of clear communications goals and key messages to support them. Setting such goals and identifying support messages are decisions that should be made prior to the issuing of any public comment and are especially important in a crisis.

A communications goal of "educating the public on the complexities of bioterrorism and preparing them for any eventuality" is not realistic; informing the public of the problem and specific dangers, providing guidance on appropriate responses, and easing concerns are achievable goals. Messages in support of these

goals must also be direct and effectively speak to the audience.

> ***Risk Message:*** *A written, verbal, or visual statement containing information about risk; may or may not include advice about risk reduction behavior; a formal risk message is a structured written, audio, or visual packaged developed with the express purpose of presenting information about risk.*

A discussion of statistical probabilities and how they translate into a "relatively minimal-risk scenario for the average citizen" might be fine for scientists, but for the general public such a discussion will only confuse the issue and fail to meet the goals of informing and easing concerns. If the risk is low, say, "the risk to the public is low."

Goal #1: Ease public concern

Messages

- The risk is low.
- The illness is treatable.
- It is not easily contracted.
- Symptoms are easily recognized.

Goal #2: Give guidance on how to respond

Messages

- Take these precautions.
- If possibly exposed, contact physician.
- If symptomatic, contact physician.
- Note possible symptoms in others.

2. STAYING ON MESSAGE

Once goals and messages have been established, the challenge becomes one of delivery and ensuring that messages are heard and goals are met. The method for accomplishing this is what has come to be known as being "on message" and is, essentially, a form of artful repetition.

If the goal is to ease concern and the message in support of that goal is, "the risk to the public is low," that message should be clearly stated at the outset and returned to as often as possible:

> "I want to begin by first saying that the risk to the public is very low . . . ."

> "As I said a moment ago, the risk to the public is low . . . ."

"That's an important question, but before I answer it I want to again stress that the fact remains that the risk to the public is low."

"Before I close I want to remind everyone that the risk is low."

- Raise your points often enough that your audience leaves with a clear understanding of the message you wanted them to hear.

Photo by FEMA

- Take opportunities to begin or end statements with a reiteration of your message.
- Don't be so repetitious with a single message that you appear to be trying to convince people of something that isn't true.
- Don't repeat your messages word-for-word every time you answer a question.

Another aspect of staying on message is to exercise some control over the conversation you are having, be it an interview, press conference, or questions from an audience. Don't allow the conversation to be led down paths that are not pertinent to your goals or message—no matter how persistent the questioner might be in pursuing a line of inquiry.

3. DELIVERING ACCURATE AND TIMELY INFORMATION

In a risk communications situation there is a constant tension between providing accurate information and providing information quickly. Both demands pose dangers.

To wait for all information to be complete and verified before releasing it to the public can create an information vacuum that will almost certainly be filled with rumor and speculation. To release information that has not been double-checked and which turns out to be inaccurate, however, runs the risk of misleading the public and undermining your credibility as a spokesperson.

- *Goals and messages should be simple, straightforward, and realistic.*
- *Information should be delivered with brevity, clarity, and effectiveness.*

The best way to address this challenge is to establish regular briefings with the media (in person or via conference call) at which time all information can be delivered, explained, and updated. If information is an estimation, it can be presented as such and its preliminary nature stressed to the media. This approach, combined with the fact that the information will be updated in the near term, keeps information in its proper context and prevents it from becoming etched in stone before it is fully and finally verified. It also keeps the media attentive to the changing nature of the issue with which they are dealing and attuned to the need for maintaining contact with you in order to keep their stories accurate and up to date.

- If you hold regular briefings, do so at a time that meets the deadline needs of the media.
- Be prepared to explain the meaning behind evolving information; e.g., "Concerning the increase in this number, that is a reflection of our having increased the number of people tested, it is not a reflection of an increase in what we have always recognized as the population-wide average."
- If you suspect that the next information update will drastically change a story, give reporters a sense that such may be the case.
- Always provide statistics and key information to the media in written form.
- Always know how information was gathered and conclusions reached.

IV. COMMUNICATING COMPLEX, SCIENTIFIC, AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Scientific information will be more useful to the audience and greater communication success will be achieved if the information provided is relevant and easily understood (Frewer, 1999; and Bean, 1988). To help audiences understand the issues, create well-targeted messages. Also be sure to use clear, non-technical language to discuss risks and other specific information indicating the nature, form, severity, or magnitude of the risk.

Ways to better communicate complex scientific or technical information:

- Use consistent names and other terms throughout a crisis situation (e.g., switching from parts per million to parts per billion can result in alarm because the higher numbers may be noticed, but not the unit of measure).

- Avoid acronyms and jargon (e.g., excess lifetime cancer risk) and provide careful definitions in advance.

- Carefully consider what types of visuals the news media may want, be sure all information is explained fully, and use these visuals to clarify and support key communications points.

- Answer not only the question, "How much?", but also the question "Will it hurt me?" to ensure the information is relevant.

- Use familiar frames of reference to explain how much, how big or how small and try to create a mental picture of such measures as "parts per billion" or "tons per day."

> ***Risk Communicator/Message Source:*** *The individual or office sending a risk message or interacting with other individuals, groups, or organizations in a risk communication process; may also be the risk manager, risk message preparer, risk analyst or other expert.*

Numeric analogies—e.g., the U.S. produces enough garbage in a day to fill 100 football fields 14 feet deep—are much more meaningful to average listeners than talking about 250,000 tons of garbage per day. However, examples should not be trite or condescending or overly dramatic. Take the time to develop meaningful examples and calculations.

Indicate the level of certainty of your information, for example, "We are 95% certain, but we are conducting

more studies to improve the accuracy." Recognize that the public and reporters generally do not appreciate uncertainty expressed in numeric terms and that this may require more detailed explanation.

1. ACKNOWLEDGING UNCERTAINTY

Recognizing and admitting uncertainty is simply the reality of most risk communication situations (Plough et al., 1988; and Chess, 1989). Unfortunately, scientific uncertainty is a complicating point in satisfying the public's demand for reliable and meaningful information for many hazards and risks. Public health officials frequently face the dilemma of having to acknowledge and explain uncertainty to a public that thinks scientific findings are precise, repeatable, and reliable. Moreover, the public often associates correlation and association as being the

same as causality. As a result, officials often face the additional task of trying to explain the data's limitations and uncertainties.

- If information is not known or not available, the best thing to do is to honestly admit it.
- Saying "I don't know" is an acceptable response and can actually build credibility.
- Audiences need to be provided as much information as possible to help them understand that uncertainty is part of the process and that the answers available now may not be the final answers.
- If an audience demands 100% certainty, they are more than likely questioning the underlying values and process, not the science. Try to identify the real concerns behind the demand for certainty and address them.

An audience question such as, "If you're not certain, how can we know we're being protected?" is not a question about data, it's about personal and family safety. That is the issue to be addressed.

2. UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF RISK

Because the risk communication process is so deeply embedded in broader social issues, communicators are faced with many barriers (Bennett, et al., 1999). A key barrier is the term "risk" itself, how it's measured, described, and ultimately perceived. Interested parties perceive risk differently, and people do not believe that all risks are of the same type, size, or importance.

The perceptions of risk for the technical and lay audience are often dissimilar (Samet, 1998). For example, the public health official or scientist uses a one-in-a-million comparison to convey a specific risk

RISKS PERCEIVED TO . . .	ARE MORE ACCEPTED THAN . . .
be voluntary	*risks perceived as being imposed*
be under an individual's control	*risks perceived to be controlled by others*
have clear benefits	*risks perceived to have little or no benefit*
be distributed fairly	*risks perceived to be unfairly distributed*
be natural	*risks perceived to be manmade*
be statistical	*risks perceived to be catastrophic*
be generated by a trusted source	*risks perceived to be generated by an untrusted source*
be familiar	*risks perceived to be exotic*
affect adults	*risks perceived to affect children*

measurement. Health experts understand this to mean that, given one million persons, there is one person who is at risk. To the non-technical person, however, the one person may be someone they know. The public will often personalize risk with the same conviction that most scientists depersonalize it.

Ultimately, the public will decide how much risk is acceptable and their decision will be based on personal factors. One goal for the public health official should be to educate the public on the level of risk and competing risks. Trying to sell the public on acceptable risk may be difficult because people would prefer to live without any health and environmental concerns. However, by listening to and addressing concerns, the target audience will be better able to understand and, possibly accept, the risk.

3. FACTORS INFLUENCING RISK PERCEPTION

Perceptions of the magnitude of risk are influenced by factors other than numerical data (Fischhoff, et al., 1981) (see table on page 20). Understanding these factors will help you gauge the degree of risk with which your message may be perceived, and assist you as you craft your communications strategy.

V. MYTHS, PRINCIPLES, AND PITFALLS

Disseminating information without regard for the complexities and uncertainties of risk is not effective risk communication. Well-managed communications efforts will help ensure that your messages are well formulated, effectively transmitted, and result in the intended public response. Consider how the process works and some general principles for improving effectiveness.

1. RISK COMMUNICATION MYTHS AND TRUTHS

Myths often interfere with the development of an effective risk communication program. Consider these myths and prepare to take action to dispel and overcome them (Chess, et al., 1989).

MYTH: RISK COMMUNICATION IS MORE LIKELY TO ALARM THAN CALM PEOPLE.

Truth: Not if done properly. Educate and inform, don't simply alert and alarm. Give people the chance to express their concerns, ask questions and receive accurate answers.

MYTH: COMMUNICATION IS LESS IMPORTANT THAN EDUCATION. IF PEOPLE KNEW THE TRUE RISKS, THEY WOULD ACCEPT THEM.

Truth: Education is achieved through effective communication. Pay as much attention to your process for dealing with people as you do to explaining the content of the information.

MYTH: MANY ISSUES THAT ARISE IN TIMES OF CRISIS ARE TOO DIFFICULT FOR THE PUBLIC TO UNDERSTAND.

Truth: No, they aren't. Part of your job is to help the public understand these issues no matter how complex they may be. The public may not make technical decisions, but their opinions deserve consideration by those who are making those decisions.

MYTH: RISK COMMUNICATION IS NOT MY JOB.

Truth: Yes, it is. As a public servant, you have a responsibility to the public. Integrate communication with the public into your job and help others do the same.

MYTH: IF WE LISTEN TO THE PUBLIC, WE MAY DIVERT LIMITED RESOURCES TO CONCERNS THAT ARE NOT A GREAT THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH.

Truth: Listening to and communicating with the public does not mean that you must set agendas and priorities based solely on prevailing public

concerns. Part of your job is to manage issues and expectations. The public's concerns cannot be ignored, but neither can they necessarily dictate policy. The better informed people are, the more likely it will be that the public's and your opinions on priorities are aligned.

2. EARNING TRUST AND BUILDING CREDIBILITY

Your ability to establish constructive communication will be determined, in large part, by whether your audiences perceive you to be trustworthy and believable. Consider how they form their judgments and perceptions. Key factors in assessing trust and credibility are: empathy and caring; competence and expertise; honesty and openness; and dedication and commitment. (Covello, 1992; Covello, 1993).


Photo by FEMA

Five Rules for Building Trust and Credibility:
(Covello and Allen, 1988)

1. Accept and involve the public as a partner. Work with and for the public to inform, dispel misinformation and, to every degree possible, allay fears and concerns.

2. Appreciate the public's specific concerns. Statistics and probabilities don't necessarily answer all questions. Be sensitive to people's fears and worries on a human level. Your position does not preclude your acknowledging the sadness of an illness, injury, or death. Do not overstate or dwell on tragedy, but do empathize with the public and provide answers that respect their humanity.

3. Be honest and open. Once lost, trust and credibility are almost impossible to regain. Never mislead the public by lying or failing to provide information that is important to their understanding of issues.

4. Work with other credible sources. Conflicts and disagreements among organizations and credible spokespersons create confusion and breed distrust. Coordinate your information and communications efforts with those of other legitimate parties.

5. Meet the needs of the media. Never refuse to work with the media. The media's role is to inform the public, which will be done with or without your assistance. Work with the media to ensure that the information they are providing the public is as accurate and enlightening as possible.

3. BUILDING SUPPORT

Unless you are assured that the subject to be discussed will be tightly confined to your area of expertise, it is usually not best to serve as the sole spokesperson on an issue. Crisis situations have multiple facets and raise a range of questions.

Having people on hand who can answer those questions facilitates and speeds the communications process and better ensures that informational voids don't develop. Identify those colleagues and other officials and experts who can speak to the issues that are most likely to be raised and rely on their help when it's needed. (It is likely that most of the individuals on your risk communications team will also be those on whom you rely for spokesperson support.)

Caution! Make sure goals and messages are understood and coordinated among participants.

Conflicting information, particularly when it comes from equally trusted sources, creates confusion and erodes confidence. Know what other spokespersons intend to say and support their messages.

If something that you don't agree with is said, or if wrong information is presented, do not publicly contradict the statement or disagree with the spokesperson. Resolve the matter in private and present the new information to the public as a simple correction or clarification of a previous statement and not as one opinion having prevailed over another.

PROBLEM: At a news conference, the city manager has just cited a statistic that understates the extent of a problem.

SOLUTION: Immediately after the news conference raise the issue with the city manager in private. Then allow the city manager to provide the new information to the press along with an explanation of how the mistake was made.

4. AVOIDING PITFALLS

ABSTRACTIONS – Use examples, stories, and analogies to make your point.

Don't assume there is a common understanding between you and your audience (even when you are using stories and analogies to make your point).

ATTACKS – Respond to issues, not to people. Strive to end debates, not further them.

Don't respond to an attack with an attack of your own.

ATTITUDE/NON-VERBAL MESSAGES – Remain calm, attentive and polite. Adopt a relaxed, neutral physical stance.

Don't let your feelings interfere with your ability to communicate positively. Never convey disgust, frustration, indifference, or smugness. Never lose your temper. Don't allow your body language, your position in the room, or your dress to affect your message.

BLAME – Accept your share of responsibility for a problem.

Don't try to shift blame or responsibility to others and don't magnify the fault to be found in others in order to deflect criticism or minimize your culpability.

COSTS – Focus on the benefits to be derived, not on the costs entailed. If costs are an issue, voice respect for the need for responsible stewardship of public funds.

Don't discuss issues in terms of their dollar value, or complain about a lack of funds.

GUARANTEES – It is better to offer a likelihood, emphasizing progress and on-going efforts.

Don't make comments like, "There are no guarantees in life."

HUMOR – Avoid it. If used, direct it at yourself.

Don't use it in relation to safety, or health, or in describing risk.

JARGON – Define all technical terms and acronyms.

Don't use language that may not be understood by even a portion of your audience.

LENGTH OF PRESENTATIONS – Plan, practice and deliver a cogent 15-minute presentation.

Don't believe that what you are saying is inherently more interesting than other topics and therefore warrants more time. By the same token, don't end your remarks after 15 minutes if there are important audience questions in need of answering.

NEGATIVE ALLEGATIONS – Refute allegations succinctly.

Don't repeat allegations or refer to them in ways that give them credibility.

NEGATIVE WORDS AND PHRASES – Use positive or neutral terms.

Don't cite national problems, or make highly-charged analogies, e.g., "This is not Love Canal."

"OFF THE RECORD" – Always assume everything you say and do is part of the public record.

Don't make side comments or "confidential" remarks. (The rule is: Never say anything that you are not willing to see printed on the front page of a newspaper.)

PERSONAL IDENTITY – Speak for the organization. Use the pronoun "we."

Don't give the impression that you, alone, are the authority on the issues being raised or the sole decision-maker. Never disagree with the organization you are representing, e.g., "Personally, I don't agree," or "Speaking for myself . . .," or "If it were me . . . ."

PROMISES – It is better to state your willingness to try. Promise only what you can deliver.

Don't make promises you can't keep and never make a promise on behalf of someone else.

RELIANCE ON WORDS ALONE – Use visuals and hand-outs to emphasize key points.

Don't rely entirely on the spoken word to explain your point.

SPECULATION – Stick to the facts of what has, is, and will be done.

Don't speculate on what could be done, or on what might happen, or on possible outcomes other than the intended one(s), or about worst case scenarios.

STATISTICS – Use them to illuminate larger points and to emphasize trends and achievements.

Don't make them the focus of your remarks, or overuse them.

TECHNICAL DETAILS AND DATA – Focus on empathy, efforts and results.

Don't try to fully inform and educate audiences on the minutia of issues.

5. MANAGING HOSTILE SITUTATIONS

Issues of health and safety can arouse strong emotions, including anger and hostility. Dealing ineffectively with hostility can erode trust and credibility. Remember, though, public hostility is usually directed at you as a representative of an organization, not you as an individual, so don't take it personally.

DIFFUSING ANGER AND HOSTILITY

- Acknowledge the existence of hostility. The worst thing you can do is pretend it's not there.
- Practice self-management. Send the message that you are in control.
- Control your apprehension. Anxiety undercuts confidence, concentration, and momentum.
- Be prepared. Practice your presentation and anticipated questions and answers.
- Listen. Recognize people's frustrations—communicate empathy and caring.

- Assume a listening posture. Use eye contact.
- Answer questions thoughtfully. Turn negatives into positives and bridge back to your messages.

VI. UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

The media are a primary means for communicating with the public. Forming positive relationships with journalists is crucial to your communications success.

1. THE MEDIA PERSPECTIVE – FACTS

As a matter of ethics, journalists will not allow "news" to be defined for them. The advantage of this is clear: neither government, nor business, nor anyone can control the news for their own purposes. The disadvantage, however, is that there are no absolutes in what constitutes news and issues that are important to some, or many, may never be addressed by the media because they fail to meet what is, essentially, an indefinable standard for attention.

Journalists strive to answer six key questions in their stories: who, when, where, what, how, and why. All the information they gather somehow informs, explains, or elaborates on those six issues and often raises doubts or breeds confusion when the facts of a news story are juxtaposed, e.g., "Government sources said there was no immediate danger; however, local hospitals have instituted emergency measures."

Photo by FEMA

The facts of a story also become somewhat relative when, in upholding the principle of fairness, journalists balance one set of facts with other facts or opinions, e.g., "Government sources said there was no immediate danger, but one expert disagreed." Although presented in an effort to further illuminate the subject and present the reader with perspectives that help provide a truer picture of the whole story, it poses a relativism that can lead to public confusion and mistrust.

All of these imponderables of reporting and news coverage make communicating with and through the news media an imprecise endeavor. What you say may not be what is determined to be news. How you say it may lead to confused and confusing reports and misinterpretations. Whatever you say is likely to be balanced against opinions that are different than yours.

Guidance on Dealing with Facts and Information

- Be sure of your facts.
- Be able to cite sources and key statistics, making sure they add meaningful support to your message (this could be three key statistics or thirty, but be careful not to overwhelm your message with statistics).
- Have information available in fact sheets and other concise informational documents specifically prepared for the media's use.
- Familiarize yourself with information and opinions that are contrary to your points and positions and be able to answer the questions they raise.

2. SPACE AND TIME

Space and time place critical demands and limitations on a journalist's work. First is the need just to fill space and time. A newspaper has never failed to publish or a newscast failed to air because there was no news on a given day. The news business demands that every day there be enough news to fill a certain number of pages or minutes, and that demand is always met no matter the relative importance of the news to be covered on a "slow news

day." This demand makes for a great deal of reporting on issues and individuals that may seem trivial.

This is often the case with stories that dominate the news over a period of time. The need for continuing coverage of a major story usually leads to coverage of aspects of the story that are less important but still may be of interest to the public; e.g., profiles of individuals involved in the story, different reactions to the story, etc. The more you can provide the media with substantive information that allows for substantive reporting, the less the chance that reporting will stray into less important areas.

Parallel to the media's challenge of having to fill space, television and radio news face the problem of having too little time for available news. Competition for time with advertisers and the standard broadcast features of sports and weather means that the very longest stories will only be a few minutes in duration and the shortest as brief as 20 seconds. While newspapers don't suffer such extreme limitations, they, too, find space a finite resource and will frequently cut stories to fit the size of the day's "news hole" (the space left to fill in a newspaper after advertising and standard news and entertainment features are laid out).

Effective communication comes not in fighting these limitations, but in adapting to them. If the time that is given you is limited—as it most certainly will be with television or radio—make sure that your primary

message gets delivered within the time allotted. If you are given more time to expound and expand on your message—as you might be in a newspaper interview—use it, but do not abuse it by over-explaining your points or straying into areas of comment that do not add to a better understanding of the topic.

Guidance on Working Within Space and Time Constraints

- Know your communications goals and supporting messages (see Chapter III, Communications Fundamentals).
- Arrange them in a hierarchy of importance and develop brief (20-30 second) statements that explain each one.
- Practice delivering your statements in front of a mirror.
- Closely observe how others are quoted by the media, particularly in radio and television "sound bites." Refine your statements so that your messages can be delivered via such brief quotes.

3. WORKING WITH REPORTERS AND AVOIDING PROBLEMS

What many people see as journalists' antagonistic attitudes toward public officials is often simply part of the basic conflict that exists between someone who has information and someone who wants it. A reporter's job is to gain as much pertinent information as possible to answer the six key questions entailed in every news story. It's a job that demands skepticism and requires that few statements be taken at face value. Be patient, open, and honest in fielding questions, no matter how hostile they may seem. If you run into a conflict with the media, keep it in perspective and don't take it personally.

Be sensitive to the full context of reporters' questions. Are they confused by the information you're giving them, or have they gotten it wrong? Do they seem

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overly skeptical, frustrated, or even angry? If so, do not shrug it off. Journalists' emotions affect their reporting. It's your responsibility to remain patient and work with them to overcome those negatives. (It helps to remember that most reporters are generalists who are constantly learning as they go.)

- Reporters are not your enemies, but neither are they your friends. They owe you nothing and you should not expect any more from them than fairness and courtesy.
- Under no circumstances allow professional disagreements to turn into personal arguments.
- Don't hold grudges.

The adage is: Never say anything today that you don't want to see on the front page of *The New York Times* tomorrow. If you say to a reporter, "Well, between you and me, the guy is an idiot," you should expect to see it in a story . . . and you won't look good. If you call the reporter to complain, you should expect to see your complaint in a follow-up story . . . and you still won't look good. If you get angry and stop talking to the reporter, you can expect to see that, too, reflected in a story . . . and you'll look even worse.

Guidance for Interview Situations

- Consider yourself the reporter's guest.
- Be courteous and patient when answering (and re-answering) questions.

- Adopt the attitude of assisting the reporter in doing his or her job.
- If you tell a reporter you'll get back to him or her, do it!
- Never be too casual in your conversation. Remember, whatever you say could end up in a news story (even if you think it's off the record). If you make an ill-considered comment, and it ends up in the newspaper, it is not the reporter's fault. It's yours.

4. USING THE INTERVIEW TO ITS FULLEST ADVANTAGE

- LISTEN to the question being asked, THINK about your answer, and always try to deliver and re-deliver your message(s).
- Discuss what you know, not what you think.
- Do not express personal opinions. If you are compelled to violate this dictate, make certain that you are very clear in distinguishing opinions from official positions and policies.
- Don't speculate or try to respond to questions to which you don't know the answer.
- Don't show off. This is not the time to display an impressive vocabulary or present the full extent of


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your intellect and knowledge. Talk as you might to your neighbor.

- Do not worry about looking stupid. If you are confused by a question, say so. If you say something that's wrong, or misstate a fact, don't defend it, admit your error.

- Don't engage in off-the-record discussions.

As a matter of normal conversation, we always speculate, hypothesize, and offer opinions. But an interview is not a normal conversation. Be careful of what you say. And don't start thinking that just because a reporter happens to be asking you questions, your opinions are worth more than the messages you're supposed to be delivering.

5. RULES OF THE ROAD

- Do not lie to a reporter or lead a reporter to incorrect conclusions. If there is information that you cannot share, say so.
- Never embarrass a reporter.
- Do not argue with a reporter.
- Never take it personally.

The adage is: Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel and paper by the ton. Reporters get paid to report the news as they find and interpret it. They will always have the last word on a subject, always . . . always.

6. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Much of the success of effective risk communications is predicated on the amount of work that goes into planning and preparing for a crisis event. What information needs to be in place, who makes decisions, who gives orders, and who follows them? What are the procedures for carrying out response initiatives? A crisis is not the time to begin thinking about these questions. In fact, it's the worst time to do so.

Risk communication efforts should receive the same preparation as any other possible emergency. Lists

of contacts with addresses and phone numbers should be drawn up (and updated regularly) and fact sheets and background materials should be prepared. The tools and information needed to communicate fully and effectively when a crisis erupts have to be readily accessible. And, most importantly, an agreed-to protocol for action must be in place.

Guidance for Planning and Preparation

- Form a risk communications team.
- Designate a team leader and assign responsibilities to team members.
- Develop a risk communications protocol.
  - Who decides when a crisis exists, what are each team member's responsibilities?
  - Who speaks to the media/public on what subjects and at whose direction?
- Develop and maintain lists.
  - Primary contacts/experts for key offices and issue areas.
  - Secondary contacts/experts for key offices and issue areas.
  - Media lists. (A media list is a list of print, broadcast, and electronic media that will allow your communications team to identify every possible national, regional, and local outlet

and analyze its potential value for reaching your target audiences.)

- Consider logistics.
  - Where would a press briefing be held? Is it easily accessible? Is the room large enough? Will it accommodate media needs for sound quality and sufficient power? Will speakers need chairs, tables, or podiums?

- Identify information needs and develop appropriate fact sheets and background materials.

Hundreds of questions—some good, some trivial, some odd—emerge when a news story is breaking. The more questions that can be anticipated and answered ahead of time in a fact sheet the better. This is especially true for information regarding high visibility public health issues such as might occur in a bioterrorist event. Readily available information on these issues will help keep misinformation to a minimum.

7. BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER AN INTERVIEW: DO'S AND DON'TS (Donovan and Covello, 1989)

BEFORE

Do

- Ask who will be conducting the interview.
- Ask which subjects they want to cover.
- Caution the interviewer on the limits of your knowledge.
- Inquire about the format and duration.
- Ask who else will be interviewed.
- Suggest other interviewees.
- Prepare and practice.

Don't

- allow yourself to be interviewed on a topic outside of your expertise.
- tell the news organization which reporter you prefer. (You don't run the newspaper and you don't get to dictate who gets assigned what stories.)

- request that specific questions be asked.
- declare certain subjects out of bounds for discussion. (By declaring that you won't discuss certain things you only invite interest in those things and appear to have something to hide, which makes the subject even more interesting.)
- ask that your remarks not be edited or that you be allowed to review an article before it is published. (It is an insult to the ability and integrity of the reporter and the editor; again, you don't run the newspaper.)
- try to dictate who should and should not be interviewed.
- be overconfident or become overly familiar or comfortable with your interviewer.

DURING

Do

- Be honest and accurate.
- Deliver and re-deliver your key message(s).
- State your conclusions first, then provide supporting data.
- Be forthcoming to the extent you decide beforehand.
- Offer to get information you don't have.

- Stress the facts.
- Give a reason if you can't discuss a subject.
- Correct mistakes by stating you would like an opportunity to clarify.
- Assume that microphones and recording equipment are turned on.

Don't

- lie or try to cloud the truth.
- improvise or dwell on negative allegations.
- raise issues you don't want to see in the story.
- answer questions off the top of your head.
- speculate, guess, assume or hypothesize.
- speak for others.
- say "no comment."
- be led into other areas of discussion.

- demand that an answer you have given not be used. If you say it, you have to live with it. You can ask that it not be used and explain why you would prefer that it not be used, but you can't demand anything . . . and if the reporter chooses to use it, there's little you can do.

AFTER

Do

- Remember you are still on the record.
- Be helpful. Volunteer to get information. Be available.
- Respect deadlines and deliver whatever additional information you said you would deliver.
- Follow-up to see if any additional questions have emerged.
- Watch for and read the resulting report.
- Ignore minor reporting errors that *don't* affect the point of the story.
- Call the reporter to politely point out if there are inaccuracies that *do* effect the point of the story.

Don't

- assume an interview is over or that recording equipment is turned off.

- refuse to talk further.
- ask, "How did I do?"
- ask to review the story before publication or broadcast.
- complain to the reporter's boss first.

AND IN A CRISIS . . .

Do

- Plan now.
- Respond quickly—the first 24 hours are critical.
- Respond straightforwardly.
- Be accurate.

- Strive to reassure as well as alert and inform your audience.

Don't

- assume "it will never happen here."
- allow your issues to be defined by someone else.
- think that refusing to discuss a story will allay public concerns or prevent people from seeking, and finding, information—accurate or not—elsewhere.

VII. CORRECTING ERRORS AND RUMOR CONTROL

If substantive inaccuracies (i.e., inaccuracies that have the potential to further a crisis or problem) occur, you should move very quickly to correct them. Remember—the longer misinformation remains viable in the information environment, the more difficult it becomes to correct.

HOW TO RESPOND TO SUBSTANTIVE INACCURACIES AND RUMORS:

- Move quickly to correct them.

- Keep the level of your response appropriate to the level of the problem.
  - Overreacting to an isolated mistake will only attract attention to the very problem you are

trying to correct. (A single yet important error of fact in a newspaper article would probably be best dealt with by a polite call to the reporter who made the error.)

– Underreacting to widely reported information that is not correct will only allow for a compounding of the error. (In this case a public statement or even a news conference might be most in order.)

- If a damaging rumor is confined to a small audience, correct it within that group, don't create a major public event.

- If a damaging rumor is widely known and spreading—making it difficult for you to reach your communications goals—you should move aggressively and very publicly to correct it.

- When squelching a rumor, try to anticipate how the rumor might evolve in response to your efforts and be as thorough as you can in closing off possible avenues of future, similar rumors.

For example, if the rumor is that, "The police are planning to evacuate the downtown area," your response should be clear and unequivocal: "There are NO plans to evacuate any section of the city," so that the details of the rumor can't change into something like—"The National Guard is planning to evacuate the city."

Be careful, too, that your comments don't leave the wrong impression and are not open to interpretation. In the above example, for instance, care should be taken to ensure that the statement does not generate the headline, "Officials Concede City Lacks Evacuation Plan." Such a headline could be avoided by adding a statement that further dispels the rumor by clarifying the evacuation issue. For example, "There are no plans to evacuate any section of the city. We have a long-standing emergency preparedness plan in place, and if it were to be activated, the public would be given notice immediately by the Mayor."

VIII. ASSESSING PERSONAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Individual styles and talents affect communications performance; and while thought and preparation will improve the presentation skills of everyone, they will not correct all deficiencies. Assess your strengths and weaknesses.


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- If you tend to an academic presentation style, work to present information in more human terms.
  - If you would be more prone to say: "As you'll see by the data, the incidence of occurrence of this particular event is, statistically speaking, relatively low and tends to remain isolated particularly when compared to similar events noted in the appendix of the document provided you."
  - Try saying something along the lines of: "The data show that these kinds of events are rare.

They usually affect few groups of people, and don't recur."

- If you have a rhetorical style, work to include substantive supporting data in your presentation.

  – If you would be more prone to say: "Our challenge is to address these issues on a human scale that recognizes and strives to preserve an individual's health and quality of life."

  – Try saying something along the lines of: "We want to deal with the quality of life issues involved here. Based on the research, that means getting people checked, identifying those affected, which will be approximately one in a million people, and getting them treatment. The statistics show that if we can do that, we'll keep xx percent of people well, and effectively treat xx percent of those few who do become ill."

This is not an attempt to achieve a personal make-over. Don't try to become a great orator or a professorial lecturer. Simply think about how you present information, or ask someone you know well how they think you present information, and see if you can identify ways to improve your style. But don't become so self-conscious of how you present information that it interferes with delivering your messages.

- If you are uncomfortable in a large group or news conference setting, try to arrange for

smaller interview sessions (although take care to provide the same information to each reporter).

- If you are uncomfortable with one-on-one interviews, include a colleague or staff member in the interview whose strengths will make up for your weaknesses.

IX. PRESENTING INFORMATION AT PUBLIC MEETINGS

What you do and how you do it will affect your audiences' perceptions of you, your organization, and the information you are providing. Prepare and present effectively.

1. BEFORE THE MEETING

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE(S)

- Who are they, where are they from?
- What are their interests and concerns?
- What are their likely perceptions and biases?
- Will they be receptive or resistant or even hostile?

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- If you don't know the answers to these questions, find out.

Prepare Your Presentation

- Develop a strong introduction.
- Develop a maximum of three key messages.
- Assemble your supporting data.
- Prepare audiovisual aids.
- Prepare for answering questions.
- Practice.

2. THE OPENING PRESENTATION

A strong opening presentation sets a tone for the meeting and is crucial in attempting to establish trust and build credibility. Its elements include the following:

A. Introduction

- A statement of personal concern
- A statement of organizational commitment and intent
- A statement of purpose and a plan for the meeting

B. Key Messages

- A maximum of three take-home points
- Information to support the key messages

C. Conclusion

- A summarizing statement

Introduction

Remember that perceived empathy is a vital factor in establishing trust and building credibility and it is assessed by your audience in the first 30 seconds. Include the following in your introduction:


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Statement of personal concern, e.g., "I can see by the number of people here tonight that you are as concerned about this issue as I am."

Statement of organizational intent, e.g., "I am committed to protecting the health and safety of the public. The Mayor and his staff have been involved with this community for a long time and want to work with the community on this issue."

Statement of purpose and plan for the meeting. For example, "Tonight, we would like to share with you the findings of the report for approximately 15 minutes, then we would like to open the floor for discussion, questions, and concerns. We will be available after the meeting to answer any additional questions you might have."

Key Messages and Supporting Data

The key messages are points you want your public to have in mind after the meeting. They should address central issues, and be short and concise, e.g., "We have performed extensive tests over the past week which have failed to find any evidence that X remains in the building. It is now safe to return there."

To develop your key messages:

- Brainstorm. Think freely and jot down all pieces of information you wish to communicate.
- Select key messages. Identify the most important ideas. Repeat the process until your list is down to three items.
- Identify supporting data. Review your brainstorming ideas and background materials for information that provides support to your key messages.

CONCLUSION

Restate verbatim your key messages.

Add a future action statement: What is your organization going to do about this problem in the short term? Long term?

3. PRESENTATION AIDS AND GUIDELINES

Audiovisual aids can make your messages easier to understand. People are more likely to remember a point if they have a visual association with the words. More guidance in preparing quality presentations can be found in the book "Loud and Clear: How to Prepare and Deliver Effective Business and Technical Presentations" (Morrisey, et al., 1997). Some aids to consider: charts, illustrations, diagrams, glossaries, maps, posters, photographs, video/motion pictures, Microsoft PowerPoint (or equivalent) presentations, lists, fact sheets.

Effective visual aids:

- Are able to stand alone.
- Illustrate a key concept.
- Support only one major idea.

- Use pictures or graphics rather than words whenever possible.
- Conform to six words per line maximum, ten lines per visual maximum.
- Feature short phrases or key words.
- Highlight important points with color or contrast.
- Represent facts accurately.
- Are carefully made—neat, clear, and uncluttered.
- Have impact.

4. PRESENTATION REMINDERS

If you use presentation aids be careful not to overdo it. When planning, practicing, and conducting a presentation, consider:

ATTIRE/GROOMING – Dress as your audience would expect you to at your place of work or perhaps slightly less formally.

DISTRACTIONS – Avoid repetitive gestures such as constant throat-clearing, checking your watch, jingling keys or change, and pacing. Take a breath and relax.

ENUNCIATION/PRONUNCIATION – Speak distinctly and correctly. Be careful with unfamiliar words. Spell

and define terms as appropriate, but don't be pedantic.

Facial Expressions/Eye Contact – Eye contact is most crucial. Your mouth, eyes, forehead, and eyebrows also communicate. Try not to fidget, glance around or lick your lips.

Gestures – Gestures can enhance or detract from your communication. Be aware of yours and make sure they are appropriate, but don't be so worried about not using your hands that you make a poor presentation.

Pace/Rhythm/Pitch – Vary your tempo. Speak slowly to emphasize key messages, pause for emphasis, vary your voice pattern and length of phrases. Avoid repeating such words as "ok," "like," "not," "uh," and "you know."

Posture – Posture communicates attitude. Try to have a straight stance with legs slightly apart. Don't slouch, but don't be rigid.

Volume – The intensity of your voice reflects your confidence, competence, and openness. Watch your audience for feedback. Adjust to your surroundings. Don't make your audience strain to hear you but don't shout at them either.

5. ANSWERING QUESTIONS

As with presentations, your responses to individuals' questions and concerns will affect your success. Prepare and practice. Consider how to answer questions in general and how to respond to specific inquiries.

Be Prepared.

If you know your subject and your audience, most questions can be anticipated.

Track Your Key Messages.

Use your responses as opportunities to reemphasize your key messages.

Keep Your Answers Short and Focused.

Your answer should be less than 2 minutes long.

Practice Self-Management. Listen.

Be confident and factual. Control your emotions.

Speak and Act with Integrity.

Tell the truth. If you don't know, say so. Follow up as promised. If you are unsure of a question, repeat or paraphrase it to be certain of the meaning.

6. SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The following questions illustrate what you may encounter, along with suggested key messages and tips for responding to them. For a discussion of different types of tough questions, consult "Encountering the Media: Media Strategies & Techniques" (McLoughlin, 1998).

Q. As a representative of the county, can you explain why the county does not have a program to distribute medicines during this crisis?

Key Message: We do have a policy to distribute recommended treatments in concert with State and Federal authorities. In fact, we . . . .

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State in a positive manner that you do not agree with the questioner's statement. Do not try to ignore it. Be polite, but firm.

Do not repeat the negative words. Refute without repeating allegations. Take the opportunity to restate your position or message.

Q. You've told us about the city's position on citizens not taking antibiotics at this time, but are you taking antibiotics?

Key Message: No, I am not taking antibiotics at this time. I'm also concerned about the seriousness of this situation—not only as an agency representative, but also as a fellow citizen. We remain in close contact with medical and public health experts regarding the use of antibiotics.

Be prepared for personal questions. If you do not agree with the agency's position, you should not act as a spokesperson.

Q. You have stated some conditions under which you would impose quarantine in the town. Does the Federal Government agree with those plans?

Key Message: We follow Federal guidelines and remain in close contact with Federal authorities on all questions related to quarantine.

Refer questions to the appropriate person or organization. Speak only to what you know and on behalf of the organization you represent.

Q. Do you know the exact figure on how much money is being spent on this problem?

Key Message: I don't know the exact figure. But if you will give me your name and number, I will get that information for you by. . . .

Say you don't know. Offer to get the information by a specified time. Don't lie or make up an answer. If you promise to get the information, follow up.

Q. We've heard that your agency and State regulators have made a deal to provide antibiotics to government staff and their family before other citizens. How can you justify this policy?

Key Message: We have a plan for providing treatment to all citizens equally and fairly, based on need. Our goal is to fully protect the safety and health of the community and to do so in compliance with all applicable Federal and State laws and regulations.

Don't justify or refute a non-existent plan or policy. Respond with a straightforward statement

that accurately reflects policy and conveys your office's commitment to meet the needs of everyone in the community.

Q. What are your qualifications to respond to this emergency?

Key Message: I have several years' experience in managing emergency programs, and I have a team of professionals working with me to ensure that all aspects of the program are carried out with quality.

Don't respond with hostility or emotion. Remove emotional words.

Q. It must be extraordinarily difficult to manage all of the problems that have arisen since the outbreak of the epidemic.

Key Message: My training and experience prepare me to deal with public health and safety problems and I am here to do the best job I can for the community.

Don't buy into the sympathetic approach. You may ruin your credibility by agreeing. In one-on-one interviews don't allow yourself to be lulled into casual conversations that might reveal information that you would prefer be kept confidential.

Q. In reference to the possible contamination of City Reservoir, why haven't you made a greater effort to ensure the safety of the drinking water?

Key Message: Efforts are being made and we are ensuring the safety of the drinking water.

Be polite but firm. Return to your message. Repeat your statements. Be careful not to repeat negative phrases such as, "contamination of City Reservoir."

Q. What is the worst-case scenario?

Key Message: I would not want to speculate. We are working hard to ensure the health and safety of this community. The plans we are making take into account the number of people that may be involved, the supply of antibiotics . . . .

Don't speculate. Do everything you can to avoid speculation. If you must, be very, very clear that what you are saying is merely speculation.

Q. We have heard a rumor that the bacteria involved are genetically engineered.

Key Message: This is the first time I've heard this rumor. The information I have seen does not indicate that there has been genetic engineering of the organism that has been identified.

Put a stop to the rumor, let the public know what you know.

Q. What would you recommend that your boss do to address the concerns of the public on these problems?

Key Message: I believe my boss is doing everything he/she can to effectively deal with these issues.

Don't give this kind of advice when talking to the public or media.

X. RECOGNIZING OPPORTUNITIES TO SPEAK OUT

The discussion of issues surrounding a news event is not confined to official sources or to a single forum. News, comment, analysis, and opinion from innumerable voices enter the information environment by way of newspapers (as news, editorials, opinion articles, letters to the editor), television and radio (as news, in special reports, and through talk shows), and dozens of other sources such as speeches, newsletters, and web sites.

The appearance of information that is related to your issues of concern is an opportunity for you to lend your voice to that particular discussion. Look for ways to insert yourself into the debate surrounding

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your issues and don't be shy about availing yourself of those opportunities. A newspaper article might give you the chance to author an opinion article or a letter to the editor that would further address the issue. Speaking before a local civic group is another means of delivering your message. And appearing on local talk radio programs is an excellent way to extend the reach and impact of your messages.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Submit letters to the editors of local newspapers.
- Contact your local newspaper to find out how to submit an opinion article.
- Call in to local talk radio programs when pertinent topics are being discussed.
- Contact local talk-radio producers to solicit an invitation to appear on their programs.
- Contact local civic groups to solicit speaking opportunities.
- If you give a speech, contact local news outlets and ask them to cover your presentation.
- Contact local television news producers to explore ways they can cover your issues.

XI. SUGGESTED READINGS AND RESOURCES

News Media

- Allan S, Adam B, and Carter C (editors). Environmental Risks and the Media. London and New York (NY): Routledge, December 1999, ISBN 0415214467; 278 pages.

- Government and Other Agency Roles in Risk Communication by Amler RW, Tinker T. National risk communication training program for State health agency personnel. Atlanta (GA): Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (US); 1993. Report No.: ATSDR/HS-93/22. 200 p. Available from: NTIS, Springfield, VA; PB93-192953.

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Web Sites

- Center for Environmental Communication (CEC). Cook College, New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station and the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. http://aesop.rutgers.edu/~cec/home.html

- Institute for Risk Analysis and Risk Communication (IRARC), http://depts.washington.edu/irarc/

- The Risk Communication Network, World Health Organization Europe (WHO Europe), Centre for Environmental and Risk Management. http://www.uea.ac.uk/menu/acad_depts/env/all/resgroup/cerm/rcninfo.htm

- Risk Communications and Services Center (Canadian). http://www.rcandsc.com/

- Society for Risk Analysis. http://www.sra.org/

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