



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

University at Albany
Center for Public Health Preparedness

Grand Rounds Series



Risky Business!

Challenges and Opportunities
of Communicating in a Crisis

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Speaker

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Evaluation

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What is Risk Communication?

- Science-based discipline combining theories from the research and practice of speech communication; psychology; sociology and anthropology
 - Often related to environmental health issues
 - Infectious disease and terrorism applications are more recent

Kinds of “Risk” Communication

- Crisis/emergency communication is *different* from traditional “risk” communication (perception IS reality):
 - High hazard/high concern (crisis and emergency risk communication)

Source: Peter Sandman, PhD,
Barbara Reynolds, M.A.

In a Crisis...

- It will *not* be “business as usual”
- Expect:
 - Heightened awareness
 - Gossip, rumor and speculation
 - Anger and concern
 - “Instant” experts

Pandemic Influenza

- Communication might be our MOST EFFECTIVE counter-measure
 - Must not be paternalistic: Decide, Announce, Defend (DAD)
 - Now is the time for an information inoculation!



Messages Get *Distorted!*

SHANNON AND WEAVER “INFORMATION THEORY” MODEL



Sources of “Noise”

- Physical barriers:
 - Channel capacity
 - System overload
 - System failure(e.g., cellular telephone service unavailable during 9/11 and Katrina aftermath)



Sources of “Noise”

- **Literal barriers:**
 - Incompatible components (messages culturally inappropriate for target audience, reading level is too high, etc.)
 - Concept doesn't translate



Sources of “Noise”

- **Psychological barriers:**
 - Denial
 - Confusion
 - Anxiety
 - Helplessness
 - Hopelessness
 - Fight or Flight

Source: Barbara Reynolds, M.A., CDC

Vicarious Rehearsal

- The communication age gives national audiences the experience of local crises
- Recommendations are easier to reject the farther removed the audience is from real threat

Psychology of a Crisis

Worried well.
Worried sick.
Just plain worried!

Individuals at Risk—The Cost?

- **MUPS—Multiple Unexplained Physical Symptoms (Worried sick)**
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Stigmatization



All Risks Are Not Accepted Equally

- Voluntary vs. involuntary
- Controlled personally vs. controlled by others
- Familiar vs. exotic
- Natural vs. manmade
- Reversible vs. permanent
- Statistical vs. anecdotal
- Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
- Affecting adults vs. affecting children

Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Do Not Overly Reassure

- Considered controversial by some
- Overestimate rather than underestimate
- Preparing for the worst and experiencing an outcome less severe is easier to accept than experiencing something worse than expected.

When The News Is Good, State Continued Concern Before Stating Reassuring Updates

“Although we’re not out of the woods yet, we have seen a declining number of cases each day this week.”

“Although the fires could still be a threat, we have them 85% contained.”

Under Promise And Over Deliver

Instead of making promises about outcomes, express the uncertainty of the situation and a confident belief in the “process” to fix the problem and address public safety concerns

Give People Things To Do

Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control

- Symbolic behaviors
- Preparatory behaviors
- Contingent “if, then” behaviors
- 3-part action plan
 - Must do X
 - Should do Y
 - Can do Z

Allow People The Right to Feel Fear

- Don’t pretend they’re not afraid
- Don’t tell them they shouldn’t be afraid
- Acknowledge the fear
- Give contextual information

What the PUBLIC Will Ask First

- Is my family safe?
- Am I safe?
- What have you found that may affect me?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who caused this?
- Can you fix it?

What the MEDIA Will Ask First

- What happened?
- Who is in charge?
- Has this been contained?
- Are victims being helped?
- What can we expect?
- What should we do?
- Why did this happen?
- Did you have forewarning?
- Where's the best photo op?

Public Information Release

- What to release
- When to release
- How to release
- Where to release
- Who to release
- Why release

5 Key Elements To Build Trust

1. Express empathy
2. Competence
3. Honesty
4. Commitment
5. Accountability

Accuracy of
Information
Speed of
Release

CREDIBILITY

+

Empathy
+
Openness

TRUST

**= Successful
Communication**

Initial Message

Must

- Be short
- Be relevant
- Give positive action steps
- Be repeated

Spokesperson Recommendations

- Stay within the scope of your responsibility
- Tell the truth
- Follow up on issues
- Expect criticism

Messaging Goals

- Ease public concern
- Give guidance on how to respond
- Provide three part action plan:
 - *Should* do x
 - *Could* do y
 - *At least*, do z

Role of a Spokesperson in an Emergency

- Take your organization from an “it” to a “we”
- Remove the psychological barriers within the audience
- Ultimately, reduce the incidence of illness, injury, and death by getting it right

Judging the Message

- Speed counts – marker for preparedness
- Facts – consistency is vital
- Trusted source – can’t fake these
 - Compassion and commitment
 - Open and honest
 - Third party verifiers

Do’s and Don’ts

DO

- Plan ahead
- Respond quickly (first 24 hours are critical)
- Be straightforward
- Be accurate
- Strive to reassure, as well as alert and inform

Do...

- Exhibit compassion and show that you understand concerns
- Demonstrate control of situation
- Appear competent
- Give guidance on how to respond

Do's and Don'ts

DON'T

- Assume it will never happen here
- Allow someone else to define your issues
- Delay release of information until you are 100% sure
- Provide false reassurance

Don't....

- ***Get caught in a lie!***
- The best way to avoid doing that is to always tell the truth
- You can lie by omission, or misdirection, too

Avoid Pitfalls

- **Attacks**
 - Respond to issues, not people
- **Non-verbal cues**
 - Don't allow body language, your position in the room or the way you dress to affect your message
- **Statistics and technical details**
 - Use sparingly

For Complex Scientific Information:

- Be consistent with use of names and terms throughout a crisis situation
- Avoid acronyms and jargon!
- Use visuals to clarify and support key message points

For Complex Scientific Information:

Cont.

- Note the underlying question (Will it hurt me?)
- Use familiar frames of reference (e.g., "a little more than arm's length")
- Acknowledge uncertainty

"The public does not always appear to be rational. Our job is not to change their rationality, but to understand it"

Source: Clifford Scherer, PhD,
Cornell University



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Risk Communication Research

- **Resources:**
 - **CDC, ATSDR Center for Risk Communication**
 - **Consortium for Risk and Crisis Communication**
 - **Psandman.com**
 - **Society for Risk Analysis**

Credits!

- **Crisis/Risk Communication experts:**
 - **Thom Berry, SC Department of Health and Environmental Protection Control**
 - **Vincent Covello, PhD**
 - **Barbara Reynolds, MA**
 - **Peter Sandman, PhD**
 - **Clifford Scherer, PhD**
 - **Tim Tinker, PhD**

Thank you!

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