

***Re Energize Houston
Youth and Student Coalition
Climate, Air, Health and the Media***

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Communicating Risk


- *“If we have not gotten our message across, then we ought to assume that the fault is not with our receivers”*
 - Baruch Fischhoff, Dept of Engineering and Public Policy, Carnegie Mellon University, 1985

Key References

- Covello, V. and Sandman, P. Risk communication: evolution and revolution. In Wolbarst A. (ed) Solutions to an Environment in Peril. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press (2001): 164-178
- atsdr.cdc.gov

The Risk Communications Dilemma

- Risks that truly harm are often different than those that cause alarm
- No correlation between objective morbidity and mortality data and how upsetting a risk may be to the public
- Some risks make people furious but cause little harm, while other risks that harm thousands are overlooked



“If you are to persuade, you must appeal to interest, not intellect”

Ben Franklin 1776



Risk Communications

- The science (and art) that confronts the dilemma
 - For relatively non-hazardous risks – employed to calm people down
 - Mold, fear of immunizations, low level radiation
 - For overlooked hazards – employed to wake people up!
 - Seatbelts, smoking, climate change, air pollution

Risk Communication Drivers

- Increased public interest in health and environment issues, which can be fueled by media
- Demand for information on risks from past, present, and future events
- Extent of “right to know” laws
- Mistrust of authorities
- Public demands to be a full partner in risk assessment and management
- Government and industry recognition of risk controversies impeding goals
- Ability to amplify or attenuate impression of risk



Barriers to Effective Risk Communication

- Messages that are
 - Inconsistent
 - Inaccurate
 - Overly complex
 - Confusing
 - Incomplete
 - Lacking in trust
 - Psychological and social factors



Barriers: Uncertainty & Complexity

- Risk assessments are difficult and complex
- Endpoints vary, mixtures usually not considered
- As a result, most risk assessments are at best seen as an estimate – interpretations grounded in both scientific judgments and value judgments

Barriers: Distrust

- Disagreement amongst experts
- Lack of coordination, communication amongst risk management organizations
- Inadequate risk communication skills
- Lack of public participation
- Apparent mismanagement or neglect
- History of distortion, secrecy



Functioning Without Trust

- A lesson to be learned from business
- In contract negotiations – accountability, not trust, is the dominant value
- Accept the obligation to prove contentions to critics, using methods such as third party oversight or audits
- By relying more on accountability and less on trust, organizations become more trustworthy

Barriers: Media Reports

- Shrinking news market means fewer reporters with less time and space to tell the story
- There are even fewer “beat” reporters who specialize in medical, science and health news.
- As a result, messages could be oversimplified or contain substantial omissions

Barriers: Psychological & Social Factors

- Mental short cuts – heuristics
 - Biased decisions based on current information
- Apathy
 - A possible psychological defense mechanisms based on prior negative experience
- Overconfidence or unrealistic optimism
 - “It won’t happen to me”

Barriers: Psychological & Social Factors

- Understanding probabilistic information
 - Expressing risk a probability of death or probability of survival
- Demand for scientific certainty
 - Adversity to uncertainty
- Strongly held beliefs
 - Tend to ignore evidence to the contrary
- Magnitude of risk
 - “Outrage” factor

Outrage Factors

- Voluntariness
- Controllability
- Familiarity
- Fairness
- Benefits
- Catastrophic potential
- Understanding
- Uncertainty
- Delayed effects
- Effects on children
- Effects of future generations
- Victim identity
- Dread
- Trust
- Media Attention
- Accident history
- Reversibility
- Personal stake
- Ethical/moral nature
- Human versus natural origin

Risk Perception Equation

$$\text{Risk} = \text{Hazard} + \text{Outrage}$$

Example: Medical Waste in NE

- Medical waste floating up on shoreline in late 1980's in northeastern US
- NJ DEP: “not a hazard”
- NJ citizens: “it's disgusting”
- RI DoH: “an outrage –no cost too high, even though the risk is minimal”
- RI citizens: “thanks for agreeing – how much are we going to spend on a small risk?”



EPA's 7 Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication

- Rule 1: Accept and involve public as a legitimate partner
 - Involve public early, clarify that decisions about risk are based on both magnitude and concern
- Rule 2: Listen to the audience
 - Let people know that what they said was understood



EPA's 7 Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication

- Rule 3: Be honest, frank, and open
 - For communication to be accepted messenger must be perceived as trustworthy and credible
- Rule 4: Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources
 - Establish linkages, alliances, references to validate message



EPA's 7 Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication

- Rule 5: Meet the needs of the media
 - A prime transmitter of information – be accessible and prompt in response to requests
- Rule 6: Speak clearly and with compassion
 - Use clear simple, non-technical language. Use real world comparisons



EPA's 7 Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication

- Rule 7: Plan carefully and evaluate performance
 - Establish clear, explicit objectives, assess how message was received

Primary Mass Media Formats

- Ranked in order of popularity as reported by consumers of “nonspecific content”
 - Television
 - Internet/Web
 - Radio (drivetime, especially)
 - Newspapers, periodicals



Consider the Time Dimension

- Where were you on 9/11? And where did you go for instant information?
 - TV, web, radio – almost instantly
 - Newspaper – next day
 - Magazine – new week or month
 - Scientific Journal – next year
 - History books – following years

The Power of the Media

- Instantaneous in delivery
- 24/7 in frequency
- Global in breadth
- Voracious in its appetite for “content”

So, where *does* “news” come from?

- Breaking news – *“Something just happened ...”*
SARS, Mad Cow Disease, CDC report, Celebrity death
- Trending news – *“This always happens ...”*
Flu season, Fattest City, MS 150, Diabetes Month
- Herding news – *“Somebody else just reported this ...”*
CNN crawler, AP wire, Matt Drudge
- “Pitched” news – *“This looks interesting ...”*
Embargoed publication, news release, media advisory, press conference, phone teaser, blast e-mail



News Editors Want to See the “Big” Story Brought Home

- Want content from local experts about safety/public health issues
- Worst thing you can do is to say NOTHING
- One-third of managing risk communication is ACCURATE, TIMELY MESSAGING

What Spurs Media Interest in YOU?

- Proactive – story “pitches”
 - Public health example – home disaster preparedness
- Reactive – breaking news
 - Public health example – Space Shuttle Columbia
- Cooperative – news on assignment
 - Public health example – potentially harmful chemicals in your home

Formal News Releases or Media Announcements

- A strategic attempt to get media interest
- Positive media coverage can equal millions in advertising—one column inch in the *NY Times* or just 30 sec. on TV = \$900 if paid for)
- What to include:
 - Just the facts; who/what/where/why
 - Less is more, a lot less is a lot more
 - Include basic contact information

PICTURES Tell the Story for TV

- Information: deliver it as a bumper sticker
- Props: devices, tools, demonstrations
- People: patients, victims, helpers
- Backdrop: good light, movement, colors
- B Roll: pre-filmed footage
- For radio, consider sounds
- For Web, consider links and video

Example

- Proactive pitch on home disaster preparedness
- Desired “take home” message content
 - Get prepared at home – all hazards
 - Enough supplies for 3 days
 - Examples of what should be in kit
- Note visual aids
- Note directions to Web links