

THE SCIENCE OF COMMUNICATING IN DIFFICULT TIMES

BUILDING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY WITH A CONCERNED PUBLIC

INTRODUCTION TO RISK COMMUNICATION



A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATING
PUBLIC HEALTH RISK INFORMATION

LOOK INSIDE

FOR THESE AND OTHER
COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS!

- WHAT IS RISK COMMUNICATION?
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Includes excerpts from the Risk Communication seminar at the Canadian Water & Wastewater Association (CWWA) Conference presented by Frontline Corporate Communications Inc. and GlobalTox International Consultants Inc. – Calgary, April 2004.

What is Risk Communication?

Communicating environmental or health risk issues to a lay audience can be a risky business. The goal of effective risk communication and public consultation is to establish an open dialogue with your stakeholders and to build trust and credibility using actionable skills.

In times of high concern and low trust, how you deliver the news is just as important as the news itself. Technical data is never enough. You have to consider the information needs of your audience, or risk fanning the flames of outrage.

“Risk communication should be a dynamic process that is responsive to input from several sources, changing concerns of affected populations, modifications in scientific risk evidence, and newly identified needs for communication.”

Institute of Medicine 2000

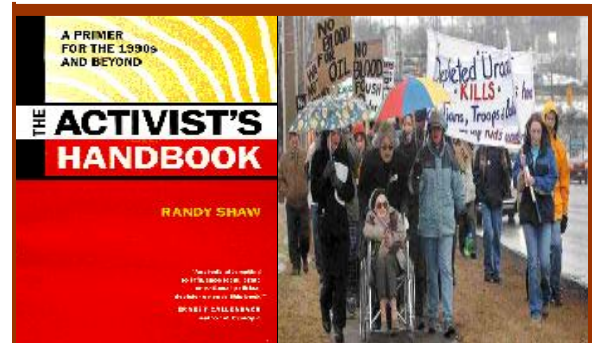


Communicating in a Culture of Fear...

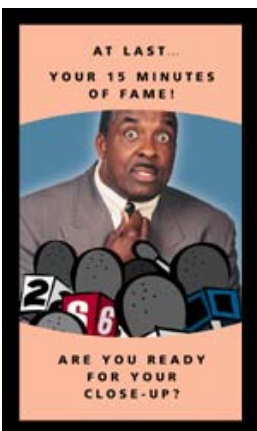
Walkerton... SARS... West Nile... Pesticides... Avian Flu... Bio-terrorism... the list goes on! Our around-the-clock media-based society spreads risk information like wildfire. And often, this information is incomplete or out of context. From the layperson's perspective, there are so many new risks in the world – new, exotic poisons lurking in our environment, ready to attack our health, and our families, without warning. The overwhelming fear that results can cause “cognitive noise” which can get in the way of your communication efforts. When delivering risk information, how you communicate and engage your audience is just as important as the information you are providing... especially in times of high concern and low trust.

Goals of Effective Risk Comm

- Engage your audience in a dynamic (two-way) communication process
- Build (or regain) trust and credibility
- Inform and educate, dispel myths and rumors
- Foster a better understanding of an environmental or health-related issue
- Encourage improved decision-making among those who may be at risk (or who perceive themselves to be at risk).
- Achieve agreement on a specific risk issue
- Gather insight and information from your audience
- Reduce panic and motivate actions (bring order to chaos)
- Help affected communities become part of the solution.



Many national activists are well trained in communication techniques to effectively engage the public and spread their compelling messages of risks and potential threats. Are you trained to speak up for your organization when under attack?



You never get a second chance to make a first impression...

- Don't push back. Show empathy for those at risk.
- Speak directly to the public about the potential risks involved – be honest, be open – be prepared!
- Omit jargon and acronyms – Explain technical terms in simple language
- Don't speculate – stick to what you know now!
- Avoid words that increase fear and concern
- Check your non-verbal communication skills

REMEMBER

1. There is no such thing as “no risk”
2. Perception = Reality
3. Communication is a process not an event

Who's on First? Choosing the Spokesperson

Some managers (and even scientists) believe that just because they can speak, they can communicate effectively. Unfortunately, that's not necessarily true – especially when dealing with a concerned public facing risk issues. Using the wrong word, phrase or gesture in a public meeting or media report could have the opposite effect of increasing fear and concern – even outrage, directed at you and your organization! Make sure you choose the right person for the job. A spokesperson should be someone who:

- embraces the value of risk communication, and respects the public right to know
- knows and understands the organization and the risk issues you're facing
- can effectively articulate difficult and sensitive issues in lay terms
- can express empathy and concern for those who may be at risk
- won't take it personally and respond by pushing back at a concerned audience
- speaks effectively without jargon or acronyms
- has non-verbals in check, and knows how to use them (or avoid the bad ones).
- has no obvious prejudices or biases toward minorities or interest groups.



UNLIKELY HERO – During the 9/11 crisis, former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani showed empathy, honesty and leadership in his ongoing efforts to keep the nation informed of current and potential risks. His credibility rating soared as a result.

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

OF RISK COMMUNICATION

1. Minimizing the potential for risk (remember, there is no such thing as “no risk”);
2. Using data to communicate risk (for the layperson, data is not information);
3. Baffling the audience with technical jargon (keep it simple and reinforce your key messages);
4. Choosing the wrong spokesperson (make sure they understand how people perceive risk, and the value of empathy);
5. Pushing back when an audience is outraged (don't take it personally);
6. Not acknowledging the public's fears and concerns as legitimate (whether real or perceived);
7. Thinking short-term (provide follow up opportunities throughout the consultation process).

Understanding Public Perceptions of RISK

If you're a scientist, engineer or water quality expert, you understand the meaning of risk.

(HAZARD) X (EXPOSURE) = RISK. It's simple, right?

But if you're the resident of a community whose water supply is at risk, you might not have the same level of understanding. Unlike many countries, Canada enjoys relatively low rates of illiteracy and innumeracy. However, comprehension of science (especially the complex science of risk assessment) is a different skill altogether. A scientist's perception of risk is affected by a multitude of data. But a layperson's perception of the same risk can be strongly influenced by emotion.

Use caution when using comparisons to qualify risks. If you dare to compare chemical levels in groundwater to smoking a pack a day... the response could burn you.

For the average community member, some risks are more acceptable than others. Here are some of the variables that affect risk perception:

MORE ACCEPTABLE	LESS ACCEPTABLE
Voluntary • Smoking, eating burned foods	Involuntary • Industrial contamination
Familiar • Solvent vapors, pesticides	Unfamiliar • Methylenechloride, volatiles
Natural • High coliform in lake water	Manufactured • PCBs, Solvents in groundwater
Fair • Affects all groups, diverse community	Unfair • Affects minorities, underprivileged
Visible Benefits • Road salt, chlorination, jet fuel	No Benefits • Buried waste, chemical spills
Affects Adults Only • Workplace hazards/risks	Affects Children • Friable asbestos in schools

Communicating Beyond Words!

Words are not enough when you're communicating complex health or environmental risk information to a concerned audience.

In times of high concern and low trust, your body language is intensely noticed and negatively interpreted.

Before you go 'live,' check your non-verbals. Have a colleague videotape your responses to tough questions.

Look closely at your physical reactions. Check your eyes, hands, and posture. Then run the tape in fast-forward to highlight any repetitive behaviours.

Remember, your goal is to maintain and build credibility for yourself, your organization and your risk messages.

The clock starts ticking from the time you walk through the door at a public meeting... and you have 30 seconds to establish your credibility. But if your words and non-verbals don't agree... your words may fall on deaf ears.



Delivering the Message

A few tips for presenting risk information to the public:

- Be honest about what you know and what you don't know.
- Use visuals to emphasize key points
- Limit presentations to 15 minutes or less
- Limit number of words in key messages
- Don't assume that you have been understood – check with your audience
- Use examples or analogies to establish a common understanding
- Avoid jargon and technical terms
- Don't speculate, guess or cast blame
- Be aware of your non-verbal behaviour

"An excellent two days with much practical information. I feel that my risk communication skills have been substantially increased."

Dr. Robert Strang, Medical Officer of Health
Nova Scotia Department of Health

"Highly relevant to my job – presented in a way I could relate to. I will have to apply this training!"

Dan Byron, Senior Drinking Water Officer
Interior Health

"Info very practical; great takeaway; very applicable for my everyday work."

Jennifer Wittig, Senior Policy Advisor
Environment Canada (Ontario Region)

The Science of Communicating in Difficult Times: Building Trust and Credibility with the Public

is a practical training initiative for professionals, developed through a joint venture between Frontline Corporate Communications Inc. and GlobalTox International Consultants Inc.

Combining the scientific insights and international experience of North America's leading toxicology consultants with Frontline's expertise in risk communication and public consultation, this program is one of a kind. It has been designed for scientists, engineers, technical spokespeople and public affairs personnel who must deliver sensitive or highly technical information to a community-based audience, the media or other concerned stakeholders.

Individual coaching and group workshops can be customized to address your unique communication issues – available in 1, 2 or 3-day programs at your location

For more information, or to arrange a customized training program for your organization, contact:

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