

Risk Communication: Message Development & Delivery

**Presented by
Steven Venette
North Dakota State University**

We have to talk to people?!

Risk

$$\square \text{Risk} = p \cdot \chi$$

Probability

How likely?

- A. Scientifically determined
- B. Intuited

Impact

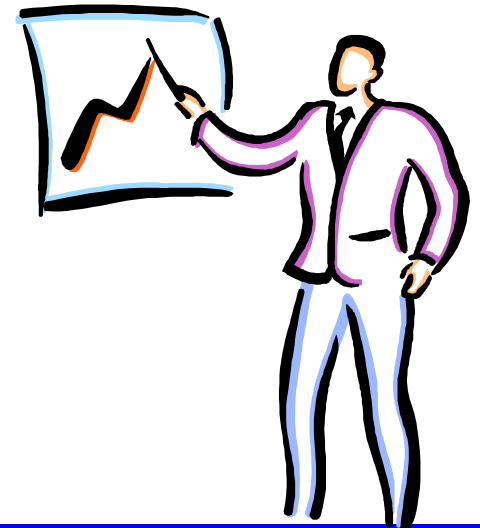
How bad?

- A. Tangible
 - Dollars, damage, bodies
- B. Intangible
 - Outrage, fear, shame, justice, credibility

- The socially constructed perception of the likelihood of a bad event multiplied by its consequences.
 - Risk = $\int [p, \chi, \text{control}, \text{dread}]$

Psychometrics

- Activity
 - Create a 1-10 scale of “dread.”
 - Catastrophic, painful, unnecessary...
 - Create a 1-10 scale of “control.”
 - Predictable, representative, familiar, voluntary...
 - Application – Food-borne disease



Risk Communication

- Definition?
- History
 - Babylon
 - Late 1970's and early 1980's
 - Love Canal and Three Mile Island
 - EPA sought help bridging the gap between “expert” and “lay” perceptions of physical hazards.
 - Psychologists answered by studying perceptions of hazard.
 - Philosophical and sociological work focused on culturally shaped meanings of risk.
 - Poli. Sci. looked at decision making based on risk.
 - Communication scholars engaged in message design research.

Relevance

- Most crisis plans focus on logistics.
- The JIC is not the only thing that can be planned. Message can also be planned.
- Recognize that there are consistent, predictable errors when you don't plan messages.
- During a crisis, you will need to communicate with people you don't know, so why don't you go meet them?
- During a crisis, we will rely on you to communicate with people you normally communicate with; if you do it intuitively, you will make mistakes.

So where can things go wrong?

Error Types

- Type I
 - False alarm
 - Thought that something would happen, but it didn't.
- Type II
 - No warning
 - Thought that nothing would happen, but it does.
- Type III
 - Right answer to precisely the wrong question

Mistakes

- We normally over-reassure.
- We normally sound too certain, too confident.
- We normally wait too long.
- We normally fail to communicate the complexity of decision making or acknowledge opinion diversity.
- We normally try to appear objective by excluding emotions from our messages and metamessages.
- We normally treat the public as though they are children.
- We normally downplay the mistakes we have made.

Mistakes continued

- We normally believe that the public are blank slates.
- We normally feel entitled to withhold information.
- We normally believe that one message will be effective with all audiences.

Message Construction

- Basic Communication Model
 - Sender
 - Receiver
 - Channel
 - Message
 - Feedback
 - Noise
 - Environment
- Toulmin's Model
 - Claim
 - Data
 - Warrant

Messages Continued

- Aristotle's Three Persuasive Appeals
 - Ethos
 - Pathos
 - Logos
- Spheres
 - Technosphere vs. Demosphere
 - Note: I will speak in generalities.

Ethos

- Technosphere
 - Ethos mainly perceived as credibility through rank and or mastery of theory (model monopoly).
 - Whose voice is worthy of being heard?
 - The priestly voice.
 - The public is seen as the mob at the gates.
 - 3rd person effect
- Demosphere
 - Credibility belongs to those with experiential knowledge (insider monopoly).
 - Community standards are emphasized.
 - “Priests” are in someone’s pocket.
 - Primary Attribution Error

Pathos

- Technosphere
 - Remove emotion from investigation.
 - We'll tell you how to feel.
- Demosphere
 - Emotion motivates.

Logos

- Technosphere
 - Proper steps are predetermined and can be applied in a vacuum.
 - Method
 - Deductive
 - Conclusions based on data
- Demosphere
 - Quasilogical
 - Makes sense
 - Inductive
 - Go beyond what is known

But wait...

- If the “technophiles” focus on hazard,
- and “democrats” focus on fairness and justice,
- don’t both positions tend to generate one-sided analysis and rules for communicating?

- So what can we do?

Balance!

- Easier said than done.
- So here is some advice...



Advice for risk professionals

- Use the 10 Best Practices!
 - Plan.
 - Establish networks and partnerships.
 - Accept uncertainty while avoiding the tendency to over-reassure ourselves and others.
 - Form partnerships with the public. They are stakeholders!
 - Listen to the publics' needs and concerns.
 - Communicate honestly with candor and openness.
 - Meet the needs of the media and be accessible.
 - Communicate with compassion and empathy.
 - Provide self-efficacy.
 - Continuously update and improve the plan.

Advice continued

- Seek first to understand, not to be understood.
- Don't impose solutions.
 - Policy formation exists in the realm of public deliberation.
 - Work for mutually satisfying ends.
- Don't insist on your findings.
 - In fact, use indexing language.
 - Encourage independent investigation.
- Adapt your messages to enhance understanding.
 - Avoid common stumbling blocks.
- Determine key messages
 - Use talking points

Specific problems and their solutions

Problem - Vague meanings

- Can result from trying to be simple, rather than clear
- Common words used in a specific way
 - Radiation, chemical, science, dietary fiber

Solution

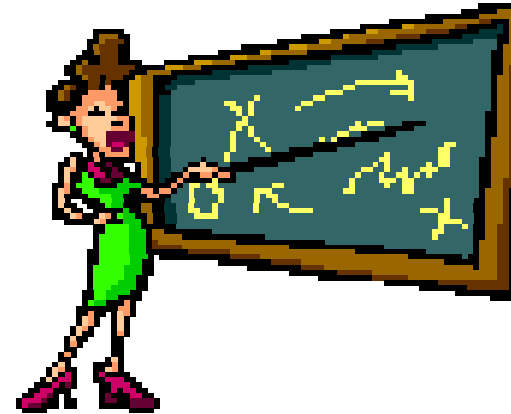
- Do not construct messages for the “least common denominator!”
- Define the essential meaning of words that are used in a particular way.
 - Radiation is energy from many sources.
- Give a range of examples (positive and negative).
 - Heat, light, sun, x-rays, gamma rays, and microwaves are examples of radiation.
- Discuss a non-example.
 - Mechanical energy is not radiation.

Problem – Hard to envision ideas

- Complex processes explained simplistically.

Solution

- Visual aids



Problem – Message/Need incongruity

- Messages present information when people are outraged.
- Message attempt to manage a reaction (e.g., panic) when the public is simply confused.

Solution

- Audience adaptation
 - Audience segmentation matters less in a crisis than in normal times. But tailoring the message to fit the message is still important.
 - Length
 - Complexity
 - Language
 - Channel
 - Culture
 - In the best situation, audiences should pick the message rather than messages picking the audience.
 - Ask people what they would like to know more about.

Problem – Self-persuasion in the opposite direction

- People think like scientists.
- Lay theories are
 - Tacit
 - Predictable
 - Obdurate
 - Maps for behavior
- Sometimes, ideas are counter-intuitive.
 - Natural foods can be harmful to your health.
 - A train traveling 5 mph can destroy a car.

Solution

- Transformative explanations
 - State the lay theory (in a way that an advocate of that theory would accept)
 - Acknowledge the lay theory's apparent correctness.
 - Demonstrate the lay theory's inadequacy.
 - Demonstrate the adequacy of the “preferred” theory.

Sound bite research

- Assumption: national news, controversial topic
 - 7 to 9 seconds (21-27 words, 30 words max.)
 - 3 messages
 - 9 second knowledge/trust window

Message Mapping – A Tool for Risk Comm.

- What are the three most important things you would like your audience to know?
- What are the three most important things your audience would like to know?
- What are the three most important things your audience is most likely to get wrong unless they are emphasized?

Key Word Message Map 1

Message Map
Stakeholder:
Question/Concern

Key Message/Fact

1.

Key Message/Fact

2.

Key Message/Fact

3.

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 1.1

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 2.1

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 3.1

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 1.2

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 2.2

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 3.2

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 1.3

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 2.3

Keywords:
Supporting
Fact 3.3

Questions?