



Crisis Communication: Target Your Message

What is Crisis Communication?

People need accurate and timely information during an emergency. As a public health professional, you may be involved in the development of crisis communication which entails communicating information that is intended to help people make informed decisions during a crisis.



Do You Know Your Audience?

Different audiences have unique concerns and will interpret and respond to a message in different ways. As a crisis communicator, you will need to tailor messages to specific audiences. Be certain that you know the cultural characteristics of your intended audience. Understanding your audience and treating cultural differences with sensitivity and respect is crucial. When making public announcements (during a press conference, for instance), keep cultural differences in mind. For example, making eye contact is not acceptable in some cultures that consider it to be "defiant behavior". However, in other cultures, particularly those with roots in Western Europe, lack of eye contact is seen as an indication that the person is being less than truthful. Be aware that terms that refer to race and ethnicity often have both overt and hidden meanings. Whenever possible, use the descriptive term that is preferred by the majority of persons in a specific cultural group. Understanding the makeup of the audience you intend to reach will help you to decide how best to deal with these cultural differences with respect.

What Information Do You Need to Frame Your Message?

Prioritize the development of messages for each audience based on the level to which the situation will affect each segment of the community to whom the message is targeted. If audience members cannot understand your message or do not feel they will be affected by the hazard, they may not respond appropriately. The receivers of your message will be judging its content, the messenger, and the method of delivery.

Keep the following audience characteristics in mind when creating your messages:

- *Education Level* – Will audience members understand the vocabulary you are using?
- *Current Subject Knowledge and Experience* – How much does the community already know about the topic? Has anything like this happened in the community before?
- *Age* – Have you considered the effect of age and stage of development when framing the message? Different messages will be required for older persons who may have experienced a similar event than for adolescents who generally have a sense of immortality.
- *Language Spoken or Read* – Are your messages translated into the languages used in the community? How will you address the hearing or visually impaired?
- *Cultural Norms* – Is your message framed in a way that is acceptable in the cultures that make up the community?
- *Geographic Location* – Are threats different depending on the geographic characteristics of the community (e.g., flooding on the shoreline, power outages inland, etc.)?

How Can You Be Sure Your Message Reaches the Intended Audience?

- *Which media is best?* - Does your intended audience watch the local news or some other programming, or do they listen to news on the radio? Are they likely to read a small, community newspaper in order to stay informed? Do they access news on the internet?
- *Is the messenger trusted by the community?* - Do members of the target audience trust the person or agency delivering the message? Do the members of the community you wish to reach find the person delivering the message credible, and do they feel that the messenger has the community's interests in mind?
- *Are the suggested responses realistic?* - Are the responses suggested by the message achievable for members of the target audience? If not, your message will be much less likely to be accepted by the audience and will be ineffective.

Keeping your audience in mind at all times will ensure that your message is delivered in the most effective way and will enhance the likelihood that your message will be received and understood.

Excerpts from:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *CDCynergy: Emergency Risk Communication*.
http://www.bt.cdc.gov/erc/erc_cd.asp

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration: *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials*.
www.samhsa.gov



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Mission: As part of a national network of Centers for Public Health Preparedness that are funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Yale Center for Public Health Preparedness, based at the Yale School of Public Health, works to ensure that frontline public health workers are prepared to respond to public health emergencies including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and disease outbreaks.

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