

Four Kinds of Risk Communication (p. 1)

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1. Public Relations (also health education) – high-hazard, low-outrage

Audience: Apathetic and inattentive; but undefended, uninterested in talking back.

Huge – most people, most of the time, on most issues.

Task: To produce brief messages that reinforce whatever appeals are most likely to predispose the audience toward your goals. For serious hazards, this usually means provoking more outrage.

Medium: Monologue via the mass media.

Barriers: Audience inattention; audience size; media resistance; need to package everything into short sound bites; policy implications of trying to provoke outrage.

"Silver lining": There is little need to listen, or to address audience concerns, reservations, or objections; this audience has few if any.

2. Stakeholder Relations – medium-hazard, medium-outrage

Audience: Interested and attentive, but not too upset to listen: The ideal audience ... but a fairly unusual one.

Task: To discuss the issues openly and rationally, explaining your views and responding to audience questions and concerns.

Medium: Dialogue in person, supplemented by specialized media (web site, newsletter, etc.).

Barriers: None, except perhaps the inefficiency of one-on-one dialogue. And you have to be prepared to explain the technical details; this is the only audience that really wants to hear them.

"Silver lining": This is the easiest communication environment. Duplicating it is the goal of the other three kinds of risk communication.

3. Outrage Management – low-hazard, high-outrage

Audience: Outraged, largely at you. A small group of "fanatics" is usually accompanied by a larger, less outraged constituency watching to see how the controversy evolves.

Task: To reduce audience outrage by listening, acknowledging, apologizing, sharing control and credit, etc. The controversy ends when the "fanatics" declare victory or their constituency thinks they have won enough.

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3. Outrage Management – low-hazard, high-outrage (continued)

- Medium: In-person dialogue ... in which the "audience" does most of the talking. But journalists may also be watching.
- Barriers: The audience's outrage at you; your own outrage at the audience; coming to grips with the need to focus on outrage when you'd really rather talk about substance.
- "Silver lining": At least you have their attention, though it is hostile (or at least highly skeptical) attention.

4. Crisis Communication – high-hazard, high-outrage

- Audience: Huge and very upset. In a crisis, the outrage is mostly fear and misery rather than anger; if either is unbearable, it may flip into denial or escalate into terror or depression.
- Task: To help the audience bear its fear and misery. Key strategies include avoiding over-reassurance, sharing dilemmas, being human and empathic, providing things to do, and acknowledging uncertainty.
- Medium: Monologue via the mass media, and dialogue in person to the extent possible. There is no "public" in a crisis; everyone's a stakeholder.
- Barriers: The stress of the crisis itself; missing the difference between crisis communication and routine public relations.
- "Silver lining": Though outrage is very high, it is not directed at you. Any anger at you is put aside until the crisis is past.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Risk Communication and the War Against Terrorism: High Hazard, High Outrage (Oct 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/9-11.htm#No-1
- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#head2
- Anthrax, politicians, and PR (Feb 2002) – www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#rowan
- Four Kinds of Risk Communication (Apr 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/4kind-1.htm
- Managing Outrage and Crises: Dealing with Risk by Understanding Your Audience (by Cliona Reeves) (Jun 2007) – <http://www.gftc.ca/newslett/pdf/GFTC-Newsletter-reprint-2007-06-Risk-Communication.pdf>
- Meeting Management: Where Does Risk Communication Fit in Public Participation? (Mar 2008) – www.psandman.com/col/meeting.htm

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