

Y2K: A Risk Communication Perspective (p. 1 of 2)

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- 1. Accept that Y2K is a high-outrage risk.** It is involuntary, unnatural, and unfamiliar; memorable, dreaded, and catastrophic. Uncertainty is high, and public control is low.
- 2. Don't over-reassure.** "The seesaw of risk communication" predicts that people are paradoxically more alarmed when you're reassuring than when you're concerned. Somebody needs to be concerned; better you than us. Even if over-reassurance works for a while, it backfires in the end: People who have been led to expect no problem become outraged at even a small problem.
- 3. Acknowledge that the computer nerds screwed up this time.** "I can't believe how dumb we were!" is actually a rather endearing theme, and it preempts the alternative: "I can't believe how dumb you were!" (This is the seesaw too.) If you don't believe the millennium bug was dumb, at least acknowledge that your mother thinks it was.
- 4. Let people watch you fix your Y2K problems.** Public tests are more credible than announcements that last week's (secret) tests worked. And early failures make later successes believable. So start worried, and let us all calm down together as we watch you making painful progress.
- 5. Involve your critics.** They'll either take credit for your Y2K achievements or claim you're headed for Y2K disaster. The former may irritate you, but it does a lot less harm than the latter.
- 6. Focus on your stakeholders' problems, not yours.** People are interested in your Y2K preparedness only to the extent that it affects theirs. If you're a power company, for example, the issue is their power supply, not your equipment.
- 7. Make recommendations for Y2K preparedness.** The best advice comes at three levels: "We recommend Y. But if you're really worried, do X. And if you think it's all a tempest in a teapot, at least do Z."
- 8. Don't neglect millennial fears.** Millions of people take millennial end-of-the-world thinking seriously, at least unconsciously. These fears get projected onto the higher-status issue of computer chip readiness.

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9. **Address ambivalence about computers.** The normal response to a powerful and mysterious force, before which we are helpless, is an ambivalent mix of admiration and resentment. Thus we idolize and idealize the computer, and we detest and disparage the computer. Guess which sentiment prevails when the computer betrays us by malfunctioning.
10. **Acknowledge uncertainty.** No one can say with confidence what will happen on January 1. Acknowledging that this is so, and that you wish (and everyone else wishes) it weren't so, will generate less outrage than pretending you have the answers. But don't overstate the uncertainty either. You do have some answers.
11. **Control your PR people and your lawyers.** The PR people want to imply a rosier picture than your internal assessment justifies. The lawyers want to add a footnote that you guarantee nothing. Ideally, the two should meet in the middle: Imply less, guarantee more.
12. **Accept the legitimacy of Y2K concern.** The level of public concern can only increase as January 1 approaches. Telling people not to be concerned will only make things worse. Instead, legitimate the concern.
13. **Keep the worst case in play.** "What's the worst that could happen?" is always a reasonable question. Have a coherent, detailed answer, one you are willing to bet heavily won't be exceeded by events. Then add a likelier scenario, making sure this too isn't excessively rosy.
14. **Don't worry about panic.** People panic rarely, and almost never when they have been duly warned. What encourages panic is getting surprised, blindsided, or lied to. Paradoxically, authoritative warnings tend to be reassuring; ask the earthquake and hurricane experts.
15. **Don't focus on institutional boundaries.** Nobody cares about the distinction between the county and the municipality, or between the power generation company and the transmission company. Obviously you can't fix, or promise to fix, someone else's Y2K problems. But an excessive preoccupation with institutional boundaries leads to outrage at everyone.

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