

Seven Best Practices for Risk Communication

Apply these best practices to improve your risk communication conversations and products. Participate in our quarterly interactive webinar to hear stories of how these best practices have been applied. Register for the next webinar and find additional risk communication resources at coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/training/risk-communication.html

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Why Risk Communication

Risk communication: “Exchanging thoughts, perceptions, and concerns about hazards to identify and motivate appropriate action.”

The ultimate goal of risk communication is to get someone to take an action to reduce their risk from hazards. We can use behavior change science to help us. It starts with recognizing that your audience will be made up of individuals with a different understanding of risks, what actions to take, and readiness to take those actions. How you approach people will vary—some people are not aware of their risks, while others are aware but do not know what actions to take. Behavior change can be a slow process, but even a small step (like your audience talking about their concerns) is a win.

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Best Practices

1. Have an Informed Plan – Know what you want to achieve and how you will achieve it before beginning your risk communication efforts.

Techniques

- Have a clear goal – Often we are looking for a change in behavior or for our audience to take some action. Flesh out your plan around how to achieve this goal.
- Understand your audience – Audience members are a diverse group walking around with different values and concerns and different filters that impact what they hear.
- Know who else is talking to your audience and what they are saying – We reach conclusions based on what we know and hear. Know what your audience is hearing from others and determine if these other messages are consistent with what you are saying.
- Develop and deliver the right message – What you say (words and how you talk about the hazard, including what to do); how you say it (style, tone, demeanor, and accuracy); and how you deliver it (in an ongoing way, because you are never done delivering your message) are all important.
- Be consistent – Consistency is critical both within your office and with others who are speaking with your audience. Inconsistent information is often ignored.



2. Speak to Their Interests, Not Yours – Connecting emotionally with your audience’s values and concerns will help you establish a relationship and improve your risk communication efforts.

Case study: Wetlands Watch is a nonprofit focused on protecting the tidal ecosystem in Virginia from climate change impacts. When staff members shifted their communication focus—from protecting the wetlands to protecting homes and jobs from higher storm surges resulting from sea level rise—their efforts began to get traction. Listening and focusing on what their audience cares about, and putting issues into terms that people can relate to, has enabled Wetlands Watch to build trust and stimulate action with a more broad audience.

Techniques

- Find out what is important to the audience – Find out how they feel about your topic. Find out what they care about, appeal to their values and concerns, and link these concerns to your topic.
- Be a good listener – Give your audience an opportunity to be heard. Learn what is important to them and identify their barriers to action.
- Start a dialogue – Risk communication is not a one-time thing. What you learn during each conversation can help you tailor future conversations to what the audience finds important.
- Build trust – Become a trusted messenger and partner. Put yourself out there and be honest about what you do not know in order to build trust.

3. Explain the Risk (in a manner that is clear and appropriate for your audience) – Use stories and visuals to make it personal and help your audience understand the impacts and the hazard.

Case study: Partners in the Great Lakes region condensed key findings from a 100-page vulnerability assessment document and made the information more accessible to a diverse audience. The team created storyboards using images, graphics, and concise messaging to tell a visual story of past flood events, anticipated future impacts, and options for addressing flooding problems. These posters have proven extremely valuable for outreach and information sharing.

coast.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/stories/duluth

Techniques

- Start with the impacts – Show the impacts, focusing on what your audience cares about. Paint a picture of what the impacts will be in their community.
- Allow the audience to share experiences – Audience members can help you explain the risk. Other community members will relate better to local stories.
- Be open about what you do not know – Start with what you know. Avoid the term “uncertainty,” but do not avoid the concept. Try a risk approach.



- Avoid too much doom and gloom – Scare tactics usually do not work. People have a “finite pool of worry” and shut down if they don’t think they can do anything to help the situation.

4. Offer Options for Reducing Risk – Knowing how to respond to risk can be confusing. Facilitate a conversation in your community to identify actions appropriate for the local situation.

Case study: The City of Milwaukee has implemented numerous options to manage stormwater flooding at their Metropolitan Sewerage District building, including a recreated buffer, pervious pavement, a green roof, and new drainage systems. The city provides tours for homeowners to learn the benefits of possible options, see what these options look like, learn to implement them, and avoid the pitfalls the city has encountered with some of these techniques. mmsd.com/gi/green-infrastructure

Techniques

- Show residents some options – Offer tours to showcase some available approaches. Provide guidance on options and allow residents to ask questions.
- Offer short-term and long-term options – To build confidence, present options that are easier to accomplish while also promoting longer-term and more complicated options. Short-term wins can foster long-term success.
- Allow stakeholders to discuss options – There is no substitute for learning from someone who has already implemented a strategy. Set up these opportunities to learn.

5. Work with Trusted Sources – People seek confirmation from multiple trusted sources to verify risk and help them make decisions on what actions to take, if any.

Case study: The Sierra Club partnered with the Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Wheelhouse Detroit, a local bike shop, to sponsor a bike tour of the city of Detroit. Cyclists explored projects such as rain gardens, cisterns, rain barrels, bioswales, constructed wetlands, and permeable pavers designed to help mitigate flooding and sewage pollution in the Great Lakes. As a result, each partner was able to engage a more diverse audience with their message than they normally would have if working alone.

ecoadapt.org/data/documents/DetroitStoryRS.pdf

Techniques

- Determine trusted sources of information – Know who your audience listens to. Find the opinion leaders and early adopters in your audience’s community.
- Establish partnerships with these trusted sources – Working with a variety of partners will improve odds that the same message will reach your audience from a trusted source.
- Work together to create and share consistent information – Multiple messengers are critical to providing a consistent message.



6. Test Your Message or Your Product – Your coworkers are not your audience. Test your communications on target audience members before you go out more broadly.

Case study: Officials in New Orleans learned after Hurricane Katrina that the small, inconspicuous signs that mark pick-up points to take residents without transportation to safety were a critical weakness in the free, citywide public evacuation system. The city worked with the volunteer group Evacuteer.org and the Arts Council of New Orleans to find a more effective messaging system, one that is visually striking and memorable but with common signs and symbols used by society to communicate. See the art installation at evacuspots.evacuteer.org.

Techniques

- Get audience feedback – Options to gather feedback can vary widely from asking a few members of your target audience what they think to doing a formal survey or evaluation.
- Ask questions that provide useful feedback – Open-ended questions work well. Watch how your audience responds to the information and ask them to share their reactions.
- Be willing to make changes – Test your draft materials while there is still time to adjust. Small tweaks can dramatically improve effectiveness.

7. Use Multiple Ways to Communicate – We all like to receive information in different ways. Understand how your audience likes to receive information on hazards.

Case study: The New Hampshire Coastal Adaptation Workgroup is a collaboration of 21 organizations working to help communities prepare for extreme weather events and climate change. Recognizing that different people look to different sources for information, members of the workgroup share hazards information with communities in a variety of ways, including monthly conversations at restaurants and breweries, field trips, photo contests, formal workshops, and online. More information can be found on the workgroup blog at nhblog.stormsmart.org.

Techniques

- Use the medium your audience prefers – Deliver your message in the format that your audience likes to receive this type of information.
- Use multiple mechanisms and formats – Your audience will need to hear your message multiple times. Multiple formats will improve your chances of reaching your audience.

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