

Four Kinds of Risk Communication

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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 (website, 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.

Handout from: [*Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action*](#)

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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.
- Medium: In-person dialogue ... in which the “audience” does most of the talking.
- Barriers: The audience’s outrage at you; your own outrage at the audience; accepting 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, and providing things to do.
- 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 PR.
- “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.

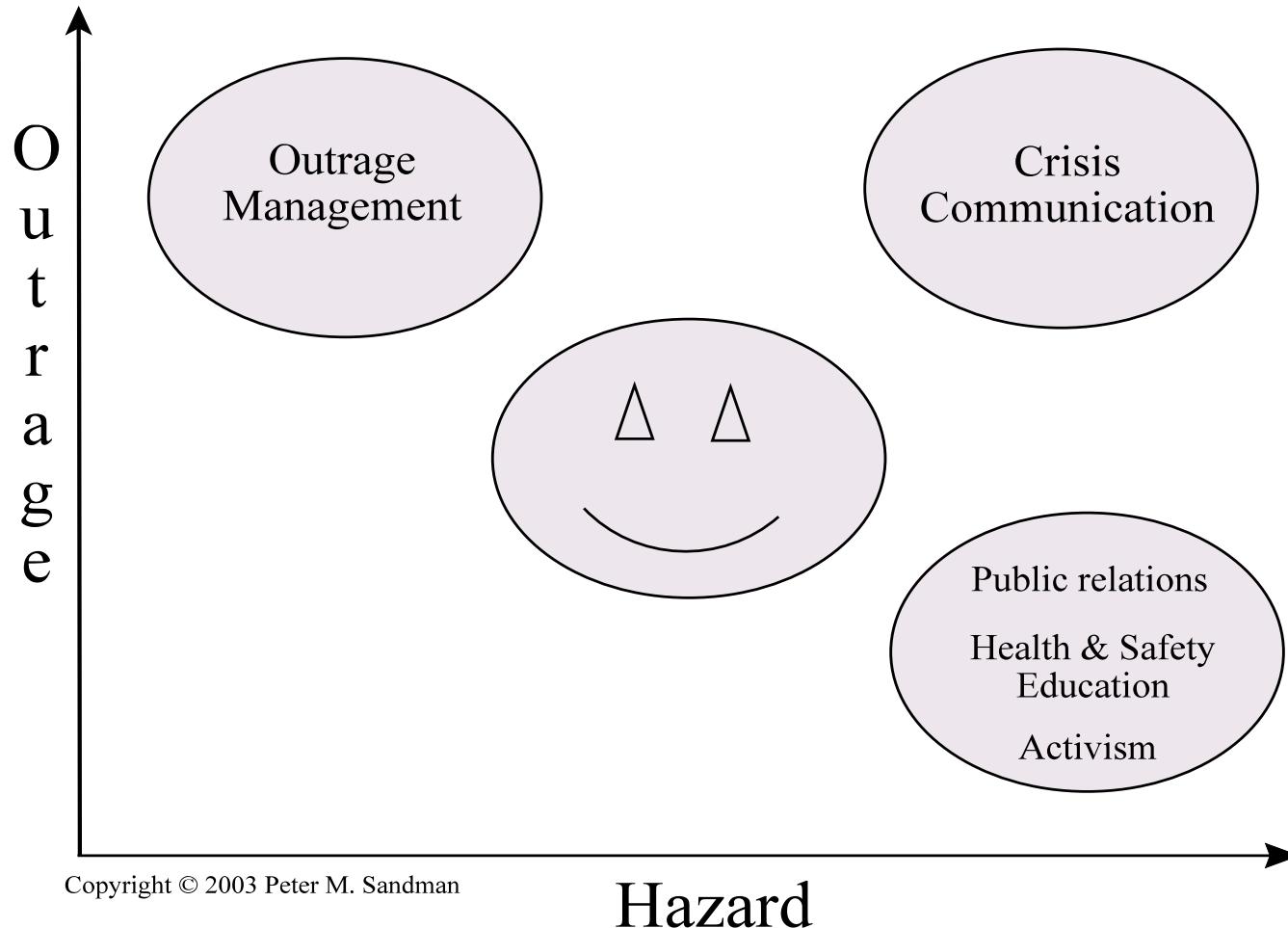
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