

Crisis Communication: Six "Easy" Strategies (p. 1)

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1. Don't over-reassure.

Over-reassurance pushes ambivalent audiences toward the alarmed side of the seesaw; it diminishes credibility and leaves them alone with their fears. If you have to get it wrong, better to err on the alarming side.

2. Acknowledge uncertainty.

Sounding more certain than you are rings false, sets you up to turn out wrong, and provokes debate with those who disagree. Better to say what you know, what you don't know, and what you are doing to learn more. Model the ability to bear uncertainty and take action anyway.

3. Treat emotions as legitimate.

In a crisis, people are right to be fearful and miserable. Both emotions are at risk of flipping into denial, or escalating into terror or depression, or receding into apathy. To help us bear our feelings, respect our feelings.

4. Establish your own humanity.

Express your own feelings; if you seem fearless, you can't help model how we should master our fear. Express your wishes: "I wish we could give you a more definite answer." Tell a few stories about your past, your family, your reactions to the crisis.

5. Offer people things to do.

Self-protective action helps mitigate fear; victim-aid action helps mitigate misery. All action helps us bear our emotions and thus helps prevent denial. Where possible, offer a choice of actions, bracketing your recommendations with less and more extreme options.

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.
Brooklyn, NY

Email: peter@psandman.com Web: www.psandman.com (U.S.) Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication

Crisis Communication: Six "Easy" Strategies (p. 2)

6. Stop worrying about panic.

Panic is rare. Efforts to avoid panic – for example, by withholding bad news and making over-reassuring statements – tend to backfire. People sometimes disobey in a crisis, but that's not panic. Worry about denial, worry about apathy; don't worry about panic.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy (Feb 2003) – www.psandman.com/articles/dilemmas.pdf
- Duct Tape Risk Communication (Feb 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/ducttape.htm
- “Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS” – And So It Should! (Apr 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm

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