

The Audiences of Risk Communication

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1. **Supporters.**

Supporters are already on your side. Mobilizing them to play a more active role in an ongoing controversy is an important communication strategy – but it isn't risk communication. The risk communication problem is that supporters like one-sided positive presentations; a more balanced presentation may strike them as excessively negative. Since this audience normally includes your own management, you are at risk of pleasing your management instead of appealing to key target audiences.

2. **Critics.**

Efforts to win over your critics may be a waste of time. But in the theater of risk controversy, how you deal with committed critics greatly influences whether uncommitted critics become more active and whether neutrals turn into critics. Critics respond very badly to a one-sided positive message. They know your problems and look to see if you are acknowledging them. A balanced message gives critics less to outrage them, and less that they can use to outrage others, than a one-sided message.

3. **Involved neutrals.**

This audience isn't sure which side it is on – but it does care; it is paying close attention. This is the smallest but often the most powerful audience, since it often includes regulators, politicians, juries, and local opinion leaders. Involved neutrals respond very badly to the hard sell. They are going to hear from the other side – and if your message ignores the other sides' arguments, it is likely to seem biased, incomplete, even misleading and dishonest.

4. **Uninvolved neutrals.**

This huge audience isn't sure what it thinks – and is relatively uninterested in the controversy anyhow. As long as it is likely to stay uninterested, you can afford to ignore this group, or to reach it with one-sided positive appeals. But beware. As the issue becomes more prominent, this audience can turn suddenly attentive and skeptical. And if that happens, neutrals who have absorbed a vague positive impression become ideal targets for organizing and investigative reporting (“They lied to us!”), while neutrals who have absorbed a vague balanced impression are resistant to the other side (“I already knew there were some problems.”).

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Stakeholders (June 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/stakeh.htm

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