



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

William Hall

Deputy Director, News Division

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

May 4, 2004





Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

Working With the Media



Working With the Media

- What the Media Will Ask First
 - What happened?
 - Who is in charge?
 - Has this been contained?
 - Are victims being helped?
 - What can we expect?
 - What should we do?
 - Why did this happen?
 - Did you have forewarning?



Working With the Media

- What the Public Will Ask First
 - Are my family and I safe?
 - What have you found that may affect me?
 - What can I do to protect myself and my family?
 - Who caused this?
 - Can you fix it?



Working With the Media

- Goals
 - Inform public
 - Understand actions
 - Gain acceptance



Working With the Media

- Media vs. Government
 - Both serve the public
 - Both seeking information



Working With the Media

- Disasters Are Media Events
 - We need the media to be there.
 - There is no national emergency broadcast system.
 - Give important protective actions for the public.
 - Know how to reach their audiences and what their audiences need



Working With the Media

- Response Officials Should:
 - Understand that their job is not the media's job.
 - Know that they can't dismiss media when they're inconvenient.
 - Acknowledge that the media are an excellent vehicle to get to the public quickly.
 - Accept that the media will be involved in the response, and plan accordingly



Working With the Media

- Response Officials Should:
 - Attempt to provide all media equal access
 - Use technology to fairly distribute information
 - Plan to pre-credential media for access to EOC/JOC or JIC
 - Think consistent message



Working With the Media

- Response Officials Should Not:
 - Hold grudges
 - Discount local media
 - Tell the media what to do



Working With the Media

- How To Work With Reporters
 - Reporters want a front seat to the action and all information NOW.
 - Preparation will save relationships.
 - If you don't have the facts, tell them the process.
 - Reality Check: 70,000 media outlets in U.S. Media cover the news 24/7.



Working With the Media

- Media, Too, Are Affected by Crises
 - Verification
 - Adversarial role
 - National dominance
 - Lack of scientific expertise



Working With the Media

- Media and Crisis Coverage
 - A Fox poll found 56% believed news outlets “over-hyped” anthrax.
 - 77% said the coverage frightened them.
 - 92% were saddened.
 - 42% were tired out



Working With the Media

- Media Beating on Your Door
 - Alternatives to “no comment” that give you breathing room:
 - “We’ve just learned about this and are trying to get more information.”
 - “I’m not the authority on this, let me have XXXX call you right back.”
 - “We’re preparing a statement on that now. Can I fax it to you in about 2 hours?”



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

Messages and Audiences



Messages and Audiences

- Judging the Message
 - Speed counts
 - Facts
 - Trusted source



Messages and Audiences

- Key Elements To Build Trust
 - Expressed empathy
 - Competence
 - Honesty – “I don’t know”
 - Commitment



Messages and Audiences

**Accuracy of
Information**

**Speed of
Release**

CREDIBILITY

+ =

**Empathy
+
Openness**

TRUST

**Successful
Communication**



Messages and Audiences

- Initial Message

Must

- Be short
- Be relevant
- Give positive action steps
- Be repeated



Messages and Audiences

- Initial Message

Must Not

- Use jargon
- Be judgmental
- Make promises (can't be kept)
- Include humor



Messages and Audiences

- Dealing with Rumors
 - Rebut, don't repeat
 - Limit rebuttal to places where the rumor exists



Messages and Audiences

- Words Count

What are the similarities and differences between the following three statements?

- a. “That is true”
- b. “That is accurate”
- c. “I cannot disagree with that”

All say yes but in very different ways.



Messages and Audiences

- Words Count

- a. *“That is true”*

This means the statement in question is completely true or will/can be assumed to be. Provides little or no wiggle room.



Messages and Audiences

- Words Count
 - b. *“That is accurate”*

This means that substance of the statement is true but it leaves some wiggle room in the details



Messages and Audiences

- Words Count

- c. *“I cannot disagree with that”*

This means you don't disagree with the statement, but on the other hand you don't completely agree, leaving you the most wiggle room – meaning there may be more details to come.

When working with media, words count.



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

Spokespersons



Spokespersons

- Spokesperson Qualities
 - What makes a good spokesperson?



Spokespersons

- Spokesperson Qualities
 - They give your organization its human form.
 - Effective spokespersons connect with their audience.
 - Effective spokespersons are made, few are born.
 - The spokesperson doesn't just read a statement, they are the statement.



Spokespersons

- Spokesperson Qualities
 - It's more than “acting natural.” Every organization has an identity. Try to embody that identity.
 - Example: CDC has a history of going into harm's way to help people and working with partners. Humbly go where asked. A spokesperson would express a desire to help, show courage, and express value of partners. “Committed but not showy”



Spokespersons

- Emergency Risk Communications Principles
 - Don't overreassure
 - Acknowledge uncertainty and/or fear.
 - Express that a process is in place
 - Express wishes.
 - Give people things to do
 - Ask more of people.



Spokespersons

- Pitfalls for Spokespersons
 - Use of jargon
 - Humor
 - Repeating the negative
 - Expressing personal opinions
 - Showing off your vocabulary



Spokespersons

- Counters to General Media Interview Pitfalls
 - Don't repeat reporters' inflammatory or emotionally laden words.
 - If the question contains leading or loaded language, reframe the question.
 - Don't assume the reporter has it right. State, "I would have to verify that before I could respond."
 - If a reporter leaves a microphone in your face after you've answered the question, STOP.



Spokespersons

- Counters to General Media Interview Pitfalls
 - Anticipate questions. Put the answer on paper and then find the bottom line in that question.
 - Make your point first. Have prepared message points.
 - Don't fake it. If you don't know the answer, say so.



Spokespersons

- Counters to General Media Interview Pitfalls
 - Break down multiple-part questions.
 - Don't raise issues you do not want to see in print or on the news.
 - Don't say "no comment" to a reporter's question.



Spokespersons

- Sensational or Unrelated Questions

“Bridges” back to what you want to say:

- “What I think you are really asking is . . .”
- “The overall issue is . . .”
- “What’s important to remember is . . .”
- “It’s our policy to not discuss . . ., but what I can tell you . . .”



Spokespersons

- Attribution
 - On the record
 - On background
 - Off the record
 - Leaks

What do these mean?



Spokespersons

- Attribution – “On the Record”
 - The normal state for working with reporters and is what you should always be prepared for.
 - Rare that you are anything but on the record with a reporter.
 - Be careful. Remember words count.



Spokespersons

- Attribution – “On Background”
 - Must first request or tell the reporter that what you are about to say is on background. You cannot assume this situation.
 - Material/quotes attributed to organization or to an unnamed official, senior administration official, etc.
 - Negotiable.



Spokespersons

- Attribution – “Off the Record”
 - Rarely used and only when everyone in your organization agrees. Can be dangerous.
 - Its purpose is to get information out to media but in an anonymous way.
 - Reporter will confirm with someone else.
 - Use very sparingly and only when information is truly worthwhile.



Spokespersons

- Attribution – “Leak”
 - Similar to off the record.
 - Usually is physical information such as an advance copy of a report, etc.
 - Again, use rarely and only when everyone agrees this is the right thing to do. Also, you as the source can be protected. Media would simply say something like “in a report obtained by...”
 - Negotiable, but use sparingly



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

The public will judge your message by its content, messenger, and method of delivery.

So...



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

Be first. Be right. Be credible



Communicating in a Public Health Emergency

William Hall

Deputy Director, News Division

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

May 4, 2004



**EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT
ISSUES**