

Managing Perceived Risk vs. Actual Risk in a Crisis

In Vieques, Puerto Rico, there is a Navy bombing range that residents perceived to be a health risk due to an increase in the incidence of cancer there. When the CDC traveled to PR to present data indicating that drinking water and ground water were safe (so far), protesters picketed the meeting. They entered the meeting carrying a coffin, singing hymns and chants and praying. They said that the CDC could not be believed because they were Federal government employees and were loyal to the Navy doing the bombing. No amount of scientific evaluations could convince them otherwise, and unfortunately, the media and the political agenda to remove the Navy from the island has overshadowed all efforts to communicate the risks (or lack of them).

Although crises often cannot be forecasted, measures should be taken to anticipate and address the concerns of your constituents. If there is information that you do not know, tell them that. Too often, organizations feel the need to pacify their key audiences, only to find themselves in situations where they have to regroup and contradict what they previously established to be truth. "Leveling" with your audiences, or explaining how "good" science is a process that evolves from constant and continuous research will not only help to manage your audiences' expectations, but will help your organization establish credibility.