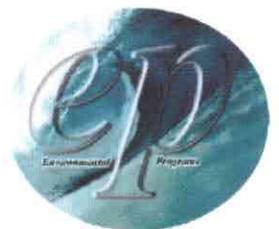# Risk Communication Primer

A Guide for Conveying Controversial or Sensitive Environmental, Health, and Safety Information to a Concerned Audience

Navy Environmental Health Center

Environmental Programs Directorate

Preface

In recent years, public fear and concern about exposures to environment, safety and health hazards has increased along with a corresponding demand for risk information. As a result, the Navy is called upon routinely to explain various environmental health or safety risks to non-technical audiences, often the general public. If it is your job to explain risk to the public, you probably realize that it is not an easy task.

To have an effective environmental risk communication strategy, you cannot simply disseminate information.

> *To be a successful risk communicator, you must explain the complexities and uncertainties of risk in a manner that your audience will accept and understand.*

<u>**Risk communication is an interactive process or exchange of information and opinions**</u> among interested parties, or stakeholders, concerning a risk, potential risk, or perceived risk to human health, safety or the environment.

There are three primary goals of risk communication.

1. **Increase knowledge and understanding**
2. **Enhance trust and credibility**
3. **Resolve conflict**

An effective strategy is needed to achieve these goals.

University based research to identify the components of an effective risk communication strategy has been ongoing since the 1970's. Numerous books and journal articles have been written on the subject. At the Navy Environmental Health Center, we are working to promote risk communication as an integral part of every Navy environmental, health and safety program. We have developed this

primer to help you communicate with an angry or concerned public. The information provided was selected primarily from the Health and Environmental Risk Communication (HERC) Workshops, taught by Dr. Vincent T. Covello - Director of the Center for Risk Communication, for the Department of Defense (DOD). Communication principles and techniques formulated from Dr. Covello's research have been used to develop the foundation of the DOD HERC program. Additional materials were selected from the research of B. Fischhoff, C. Chess, P. M. Sandman, and B. J. Hance. It is not a complete summary of risk communication literature, but a quick reference guide. It is meant to provide a framework of risk communication principles and associated tools to use when explaining environmental, health or safety risks to the public.

The Risk Communication Process

A communication crisis usually begins as a result of a perceived, potential, or actual threat to the environment or to personal safety and health.

Before you communicate any information about the nature and magnitude of risk, you must know your public and understand their concerns.

You must identify who is affected and/or who will be most interested in the information. You must also know the specific concerns of these groups, both expressed and underlying, before you can formulate effective messages.

The guidelines that follow may sound short and simple. In reality, however, conveying scientific or highly technical information to a concerned audience is not an easy task. There is no "cookie cutter" approach to communicating with an angry or concerned public. Careful planning and application of specific tools and theory are necessary to make your communication efforts successful.

Take careful notice of the "Tool Box Tip" boxes located throughout this document. They highlight several important and frequently used risk communication tools and tips. These tools will help you create an effective communication strategy built on mutual trust and understanding.

There are three primary tool categories, referred to here as the 3 M's of risk communication. Thinking about risk communication in terms of these categories will help you organize your planning process and assist you in deciding what to say, who should say it, and how best to get the information to the public.

The Three M's of Risk Communication

Message (what to say)
Messenger (who to say it)
Media (How it should be presented)

Message

The underlying objective of any communication process is to exchange information, or to convey a message. You must be cautious when your message includes an explanation of risk information. There is a balance that you must achieve between giving people so much data and technical information that they are overwhelmed or oversimplifying information so much that important information is left out. During the initial stages in message development, there are three questions that can help you determine the appropriate messages.

Initial Message Development Questions

**What are the three most important things you would like your audience to know?**

What three things would your audience most like to know?

What are the three points your audience is most likely to get wrong unless they are emphasized?

Research indicates that *when people are angry or upset they often want to "know that you care before they care what you know."*

In addition, people who are upset have difficulty hearing and processing information. As much as **80%** of the message may be ignored completely, forgotten, or misinterpreted. For this reason, after deciding on your messages, give careful consideration to the content and organization of the information you plan to present.
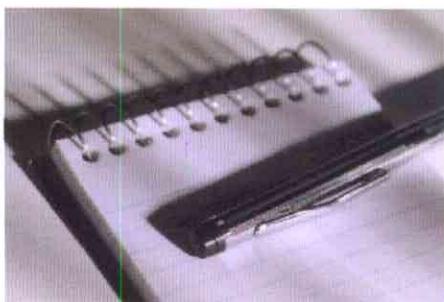
There are three general rules, which will help you get started laying out your messages.

1. Provide verbal and non-verbal messages that convey empathy/ caring, honesty/openness, and dedication/commitment

2. Avoid messages that convey only technical facts and information

3. Recognize the impact of credible, third party sources

All three rules have one primary goal, *to maximize the amount of information your audience hears, understands, and remembers.* There are four tips which when used, will help you reach this goal.

Tips for Message Retention

- Provide a **structured** and organized message

- Limit your information to **3 key messages**

- Keep your messages short (present each message as a **7-12 word soundbite** followed by **2-4 supporting facts**)

- **Repeat** your key messages

The general rules and steps sound easy enough at first, but you will probably find that several questions come to mind when you actually start formulating messages. Here are a few common questions and answers associated with message development.

1. How long should my messages be?
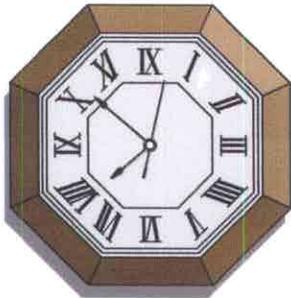
The length of your message depends on the format of the communication. Always remember to **keep your key messages short**. The following are time limits for typical communication formats:

Time Limits

- **20 minutes** combined time for **ALL** speakers during a public meeting

- **2 minutes** when answering a question at a public meeting

- **8 to 10 second** "sound-bites" when answering questions during an interview with the media

- Provide **three minutes** for interacting with the public (questions/comments) for every minute you speak

Note that these time limit recommendations apply to written communications as well as oral. Read your messages out loud to time them before you get in front of an audience.

2. Is there a recommended layout or approach to use when organizing my information?
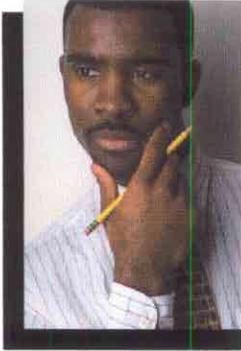
Because of the widely varied backgrounds, interests, and education levels of the general public, you will need to provide an easy to understand yet highly organized message to keep everyone's attention. Risk communication literature recommends using both the TTT (Triple T) Model and the Layered Model for the layout of your information. These models apply to both the information presented in an oral presentation, in response to questions, or in written communications such as a fact sheet or news release.

Information Layout Models

TTT Model – Tell them what you are going to tell them, Tell them, Tell them what you told them. This model ensures you repeat your key messages.

Layered Model – Start with the simplest information and move to the more complex. Keep the reading level between 6th and 8th grade.

3. I've always heard that humor will help to "break the ice." Should I start with a tasteful joke?

PATCH ADAMS
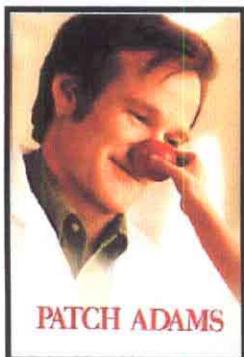
In a high concern, low trust situation you should never use humor. Public perception will most likely be that you are trying to belittle their concerns. Humor is one of several common traps and pitfalls that you should avoid when preparing a risk communication message. The following is a list of common traps and pitfalls to avoid in message

Traps and Pitfalls

- **Humor**

- **Negative terms**

- **Guarantees or absolute phrases (e.g. always, never, definitely)**

- **Using complex language and jargon**

- **Personal beliefs**

- **Attack (statements about the credibility of opposing groups/opinions)**

- **Risk comparisons (do not use to justify a health risk only to put numbers into perspective)**

- **Worst case speculation**

- **Risk numbers or concentration values**

4. While choosing the words to use in my messages, are there any tips to help me get through to angry people?

Note that the use of negative words/ phrases, another trap and pitfall, can be very damaging to your communication effort. Research indicates that when people are upset or afraid they tend to focus only on the negative aspects of your communication and hear only the negative words and phrases. The following are some examples of negative words and phrases to avoid:

Negatives to Avoid

- **The five N's (No, Not, Never, Nothing, None)**

- **Contamination/ contaminant**

- **Pollution/pollutant**

- **Toxic**

- **Dangerous**

In addition to avoiding negative words and phrases you should **keep your messages as short and simple as possible**. The box on the following page contains some helpful hints to use to simplify the language in your messages.

Tips for Simplifying Language

*The following are some tips to help you cut the jargon out of your communication with people.*

1. Ask yourself if you are using the word to impress. If so, cut it out.

2. Once you have explained the piece of jargon satisfactorily, consider dropping it and using the plain language equivalent instead. (Thus, don't simply define "potable water" as drinking water-use "drinking water" throughout.)

3. If the jargon is needed by the audience, either for convenience or efficiency or to understand materials on the subject, teach it. But only if it is necessary.

4. If you have to teach the jargon, introduce the concept first in plain language, then say there is a technical term for it. Never use the term first before you explain what it means.

5. Be especially wary of jargon when the conflict is heating up or when other professionals are present. This is when technical people use jargon the most - and when citizens resent it the most.

6. Acknowledge to your audience that you may forget and use jargon. Ask your audience to stop you immediately if you lose them.

7. Work with other presenters to help them simplify similarly.

8. After you've gotten rid of jargon, work on other complicated language, sentence structure, etc.

9. For a written presentation, check readability by asking a non-technical person to read it to make sure it is clear and simple enough. For a spoken presentation, practice on a non-technical person.

Messenger

One primary goal of risk communication is to establish trust and credibility. The messenger is vital to achieving this goal. Selecting a spokesperson is just as critical to your communication process as deciding what to say.

Risk communication literature identifies four factors that determine whether or not the public will perceive a messenger as trusted and credible. They are ***empathy and caring, honesty and openness, dedication and commitment, and competence and expertise.***

Trust and Credibility Factors

50%
Empathy/Caring

15-20%
Competence/Expertise

15-20%
Dedication/Commitment

15-20%
Honesty/Openness
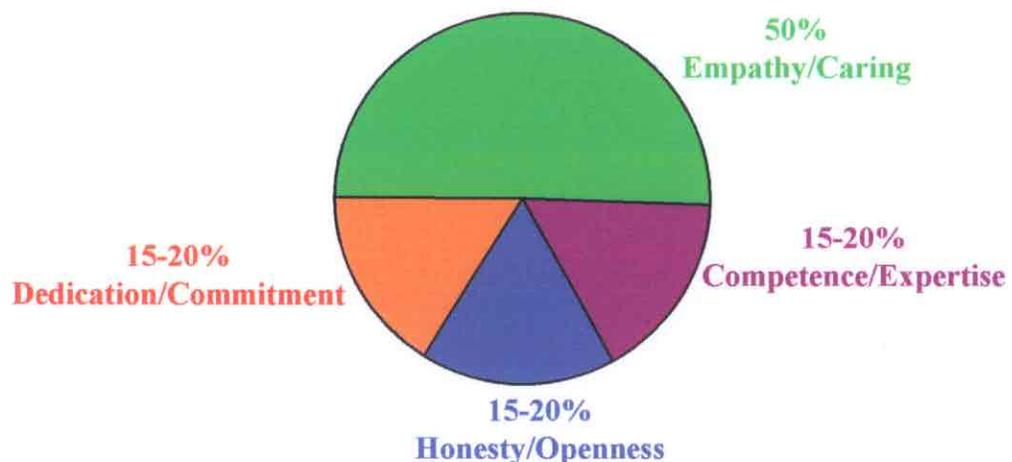
Of these four, **empathy and caring is by far the most important in establishing the trust and credibility of the messenger** with the audience. Research indicates that the public will judge trust and credibility within the **first 30 seconds** of communication with the audience, so the opening remarks and the way in which they are conveyed are critical.

The person you select to represent your organization must, at a minimum, have experience and feel at ease with public speaking. In addition, he or she needs to understand risk communication principles and the effect that his or her presentation style will have on the public's perception of risk.

### Guidelines for Communicating Empathy and Caring

- Select a messenger who has a real connection with your audience (e.g. I live here too, I work here also, My children also attend this school, etc.)

- Use opening remarks that indicate active listening about community's concerns (e.g. I understand your concerns about ..., Based on the information printed in the newspaper I would be concerned as well.)

- Select a messenger with a calming voice, and ensure the pace of the presentation does not appear rushed

After conveying empathy and caring, an effective messenger must also establish himself or herself as an open and honest source of information. When a public speaker appears nervous or hesitant, the audience will often perceive that the spokesperson is withholding or misrepresenting information.

The messenger's non-verbal messages must match the verbal information being conveyed. Always keep in mind the impact that non-verbal communication, also known as body language; has on the overall message received by the public.

## *Body language can provide 50% to 75% of the final message content.*
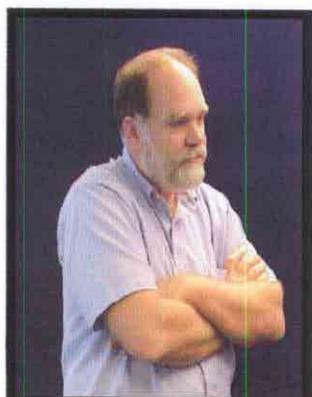
In general, body language is noticed intensely by the audience and almost always interpreted as negative. Experienced public speakers are aware of the effect of body language on the success of their presentations and know how to control the message that their non-verbal communication is sending.

Body Language Examples

- **Eye movement –** Make eye contact while slowly sweeping the room. Avoid darting eyes or staring.

- **Hand movement and positioning –** Try to keep your hands open, at about waist level. Avoid large, waving hand movements, crossing your arms, clasping your hands, making a fist, or putting your hands in your pockets.

- **Posture –** If possible, lean slightly forward from the waist. Avoid any extremes such as slouching or sitting or standing in a straight, rigid position.
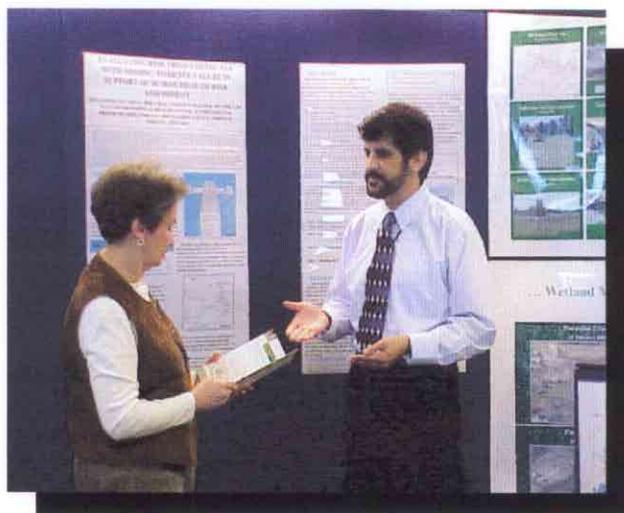
Establishing yourself as an open and honest spokesperson also requires that you be willing to admit that you may not know all the answers. **When you don't know the answer, say so, but commit to obtaining and providing the information.** (And of course, always do so.)

Dedication and commitment, the third factor of a trusted and credible speaker, may seem difficult to establish in one meeting. This is the type of opinion that people typically form after establishing a history with a co-worker or friend. But during a crisis, a person's first impression is generally a lasting one. Here are a few tips to keep in mind to help you convey your dedication and commitment to the audience.

Guidelines to Establish Dedication and Commitment

- **Come early and stay late** for any public meeting or open house that you hold. This will allow ample time for effective one-on-one communication.

- **Provide a phone number** where you can be reached.

- Above all, **KEEP ALL OF YOUR PROMISES AND COMMITMENTS**.

The fourth factor, which effects the public's perception of a messenger, is **competence and expertise**. Research indicates that **appearance and personality greatly influence whether a person is perceived as competent**, regardless of how knowledgeable they actually are. There are a few tips from risk communication literature that may help to enhance a speaker's competence in the eyes of the public.
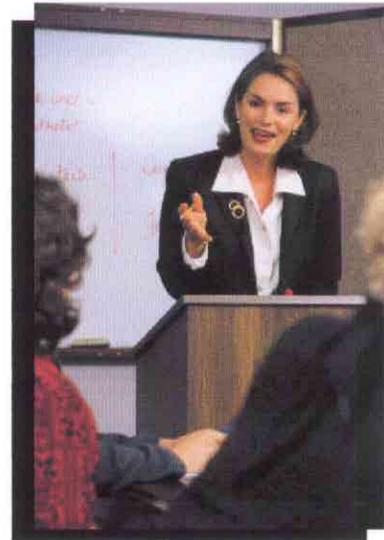
Guidelines for Communicating Competence

- **Limit the use of notes; avoid written speeches; use checklists and/or index cards**

- **Show a high level of organization and logic (e.g. three key messages with up to 3 supporting facts for each message)**

- **Dress professionally in clothing which you would wear to work – Avoid "over-dressing or under-dressing"**

- **Use a lower voice tone**

- **Be assertive (e.g. avoid hedging/tentative words or raising your voice at the end of a sentence)**

Media

Now that you have developed your key messages and selected your messenger, you must answer one final question. **How will you be presenting the information?**

Public Information Channels

- **Infolines**
- **Fact sheets**
- **Press releases**
- **Site tours**
- **Small group meetings**
- **One on one meetings with influential people**
- **Information Exchange Forums (Open house or Public Availability Session)**
- **Town Hall Public Meetings**.

Public information strategies are developed for a variety of reasons. The two primary reasons are to satisfy a legal requirement within one of the environmental or public right-to-know regulations or to voluntarily provide information to the community. In either instance, please be aware that **there are formats other than the traditional *Town Hall Public Meeting*** that may meet legal requirements and have been found to be much more effective in educating or informing the public.
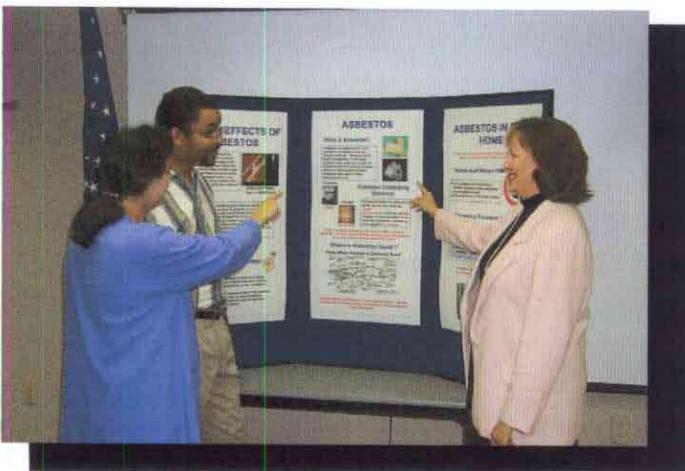
Research indicates that the *Open House* or *Public Availability Session* is the most effective format for informing the public on environmental or health and safety risks. There are three primary advantages of this format.

Advantages of an Open House

- **Encourages one-on-one communication**

- **Provides a variety of layered information to meet individual needs**

- **Allows for community participation**

The *Open House* can be used as a substitute for the *Town Hall Public Meeting* or as a supplement immediately prior to and/or after a scheduled public meeting.

Essentially, an *Open House* is a poster exhibit, typically comprised of four to six displays. The displays each highlight one topic and are manned by a subject matter expert (preferably one with risk communication training). They are spaced around the meeting area to allow for individual discussions. An *Open House* is usually scheduled for a four to six hour duration.
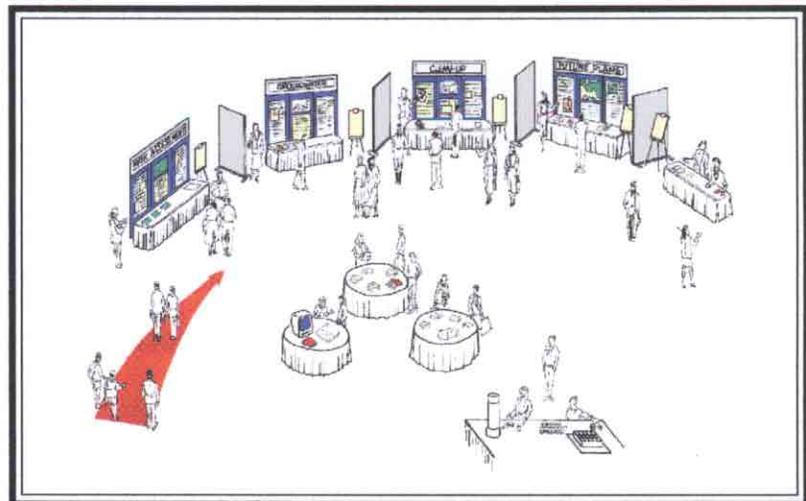
•••••• **Drawbacks to a Town Hall Public Meeting** •••

- *Limits participation (only a limited number of questions can be addressed in a reasonable amount of time)*

- *Forces the presenter and anyone asking a question to be a "public speaker".*

- *Encourages unproductive/negative group dynamics (e.g. mob mentality or "us versus them")*

- *Limits expression of diverse viewpoints (many people are afraid of public speaking and/or speaking out against the group)*

- *Fails to meet individual needs (very difficult to layer information to meet the various levels of knowledge within the community)*

Often, the most difficult part of communicating with the public comes after you present your information.

All representatives must be prepared to answer difficult questions.

Remember that not all of these questions will be posed during a **Town Hall Public Meeting** or **Open House**. There may also be telephone calls or written requests for information following or preceding a public meeting or in response to information provided through fact sheets, news releases, or media interviews.

You must use advanced thought and effort to ensure you provide organized and concise answers to these questions. When faced with this type of general, but often difficult task, one question quickly comes to mind. *"Where do I start?"*

The first step in developing good answers is anticipating the tough questions.

• • • **Sources to Anticipate Questions and Concerns** • • •

- **A review of news coverage**

- **Actual citizen calls and interviews**

- **What has come up in similar situations in your organization**

- **Interviews with opinion leaders, focus groups and surveys**

- **Any other source of information about the issue**

Now that you have generated your list of tough questions, it is time to draft answers that will effectively communicate your key message(s) while responding to the question. Risk communication researchers have developed models recommended for use when outlining and developing answers to tough questions regarding risks to health, safety, and the environment. One example is the Six-Part Model.
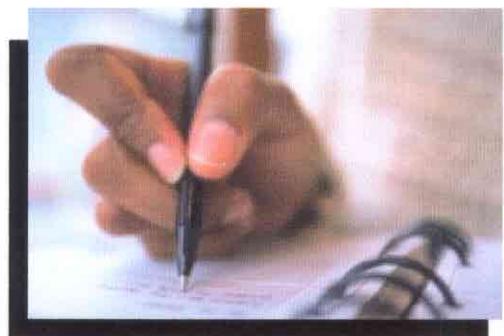
Six Part Model

1. **Express empathy or concern**
   - Differs for male/female
   - Include personal story for enhancement
   - Use transition from empathy to conclusion

2. **Provide conclusion**
   - Positive
   - In a 7-12 word soundbite
   - Framed or set off
   - Address underlying concern

3. **Provide first supporting fact or key message**
   - Third party endorsement
   - Story and/or analogy for one fact

4. **Provide second supporting fact or key message**
   - Use transition from supporting facts to conclusion

5. **Repeat exact conclusion as stated above**

6. **Describe future action**
   - Describe your commitment to continuous improvement
   - Indicate how to obtain more information

An answer prepared using the six-part model should take between one and two minutes to present.

The News Media

Working with members of the news media can present some rather tricky situations even for an experienced communicator. First and foremost, you must recognize the **power** of the media. Underestimating the power of the media can have disastrous consequences. Risk communication research is full of examples or case studies in which a spokesperson has turned a situation from bad to worse by not being prepared and providing the wrong message to reporters during an interview.

Remember to keep your messages short and repeat them often.

Due to air time or print space constraints, you must be prepared to summarize and emphasize the key messages in the 6 part model to shorter, more compact responses during media interviews. The Risk Communication Three-Part Model will help you streamline your six part model answers into responses that are better suited for dealing with the media. There are three options for answers using this model.

Three Part Model

- **Option 1 – empathy/caring statement followed by the conclusion and future action**

- **Option 2 – conclusion followed by two supporting facts**

- **Option 3 – state your three conclusions or key messages**

Always know what you want to say as well as what you do NOT want to say. And finally, never forget that **there is no such thing as "off the record!"** Be prepared and make sure you know the reporter's game plan before agreeing to an interview. There is certain information that you have the right to know, and should know, before answering any questions.

Pre-Interview Questions

- **Whom am I talking to?**
- **Whom do you represent?**
- **What is the format for the interview?**
- **What topic will be discussed?**
- **What's your deadline?**

Once you have the answers to these questions, you can prepare properly for your interview. A good starting point is to develop a **fact sheet** or **press release** to provide a written record of the key messages to the reporter. After this, you must plan differently for television versus newspaper interviews.

A newspaper interview will typically be more involved and take longer, providing ample opportunity for clear and concise answers or to make mistakes when you are not prepared properly. In contrast television interviews will typically not present as much material. They can easily highlight your message in a well-planned soundbite or create a public relations nightmare with a poor response or a soundbite taken out of context.

Guidelines for TV interviews

- Limit the length of your conclusion (key message) to an **8-12 second soundbite**.

- Follow with your supporting facts. These can be longer than 8-12 seconds and provide more information.

- Return to your key message.
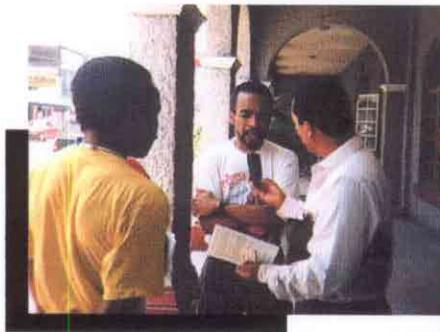
Newspaper Interview Tips

- Be prepared to discuss the subject in detail.

- State your key messages early and often.

- Correct any mistakes as early as possible.

- Return to your key messages when questions take you off track.

The following table contains a list of some of the common questions you can expect from a reporter after providing information on risk or risk management.

Questions Journalists are Taught to Ask During a Disaster or Emergency

- What is your name and title?
- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- What is being done in response to the crisis?
- How long will be before the situation is corrected or returns to normal?
- What help has been requested or offered?
- How many people were harmed, injured or killed?
- What are their names?
- What is the amount of damage?
- What other damage occurred?
- What do you do there?
- Who was involved?
- Why did it happen?
- What was the cause?
- Who was at fault?
- Who is conducting the investigation?
- What are you going to do about it?
- What other organizations are involved in the response?
- What effect will it have on the organization?
- What safety measures were taken?
- Who is to blame?
- Do you accept responsibility for what happened?
- Has this ever happened before?
- What do you have to say to the victims or families of victims?
- Does the danger continue?
- Will there be inconvenience to employees or the public?
- How much will it cost the organization?
- Is the organization able and willing to pay the costs?
- Who will pay the costs if the organization is not able or willing to pay?
- When will we find our more?
- What steps are being taken to avoid a similar incident?
- What lessons did you learn?

For more information...

The Navy Environmental Health Center, *Environmental Programs Directorate* is available to provide health and environmental risk communication support to Navy activities.

Services we provide:

Training

- **3-day Health & Environmental Risk Communication Workshop**
  Visit the Naval School, Civil Engineering Corps Officers (CECOS) website located at www.cecos.navy.mil. for more information about this course, including dates and locations for upcoming workshops. This course is designed to teach attendees how to have open discussion on environmental restoration issues, establish confidence in communicating key messages, develop effective media and public meeting techniques, improve verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and revitalize stakeholder dialogue.

- **Advanced Health & Environmental Risk Communication Workshop**
  Special request, tailored to your specific area of concern

- **2 to 8 Hour Health & Environmental Risk Communication Workshops**
  Tailored to your specific area of concern

Community Outreach

- **Technical Training for Stakeholder Groups**
- **Profiling the Community**
- **Assistance with Community Relations Plans**
- **Evaluation of Community Outreach Activities**

Verbal Communication

- **Message Development**
- **Presenter Practice/Evaluation**
- **Meeting Planning and Facilitation**
- **Open House Planning/Poster Presentations**
- **Crisis Communication**

Written Communication

- **Fact Sheet & Press Release Preparation**

- **Preparation of Executive Summaries for Technical Documents**

- **Development of Posters and Visual Media to Convey Scientific/ Technical Information**

    We have poster displays available on several of the most common chemicals or hazards present at Installation Restoration (IR) sites as well as general displays explaining such topics as the IR process and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Given sufficient notice, we can develop site specific poster displays for your activity's needs.

- **Correspondence Development/Review**

All consultation services and poster displays in support of the Navy IR Program and BRAC program are free of charge.

Please contact us at (757) 953-0932 with any questions or requests for assistance. In addition, you may visit our web site at **www.nehc.med.navy.mil** (in the Directorate Directory choose Environmental Programs) for additional information on the Navy Environmental Health Center and the services we provide.

"Protecting Health & the Environment"

Environmental Programs Directorate

Navy Environmental Health Center

620 John Paul Jones Circle
Suite 1100
Portsmouth, VA 23708-2103
www-nehc.med.navy.mil