

ANNEX 3. PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF EFFECTIVE MEDIA COMMUNICATION

Listed below is a brief summary of the principles and techniques of effective media communication. This summary is based upon a review of the scientific and practitioner literature. These principles and techniques are covered in the seven steps. They are repeated and summarized here for the convenience of the reader. More information on each principle and technique can be found in earlier sections of this handbook.

I. Principles and techniques

1. Accept the media as a legitimate partner

- Recognize that effective media communication in an emergency or crisis:
 - enables the media to play a constructive role in protecting the public's health;
 - enables public health officials to reach a wide range of stakeholders; and
 - enables public health officials, in cooperation with the media, to build trust, calm a nervous public, provide needed information, encourage cooperative behaviours, and save lives.
- Demonstrate respect for the media by keeping them well informed of decisions and actions.
- Establish good working relationships with media contacts before an emergency arises.
- Include journalists in public emergency response planning exercises.
- Be polite and courteous at all times, even if the reporter is not.
- Avoid embarrassing reporters.
- Provide information for on-site reporters on the location of electrical outlets, public telephones, rest rooms, hotels, restaurants and other amenities.
- Avoid being defensive or argumentative during interviews.
- Include elements in interviews that make a story interesting to the media, including examples, stories and other aspects that influence public perceptions of risk, concern and outrage.
- Use a wide range of media communication channels to engage and involve people.
- Adhere to the highest ethical standards – recognize that people hold you professionally and ethically accountable.
- Strive to inform editors and reporters of agency preparedness for a public health emergency.
- Offer to follow-up on questions that cannot be addressed immediately.
- Strive for “win-win” media outcomes.
- Involve the media in training exercises and preparedness drills.

2. Plan thoroughly and carefully for all media interactions

- Assess the cultural diversity and socioeconomic level of the target populations.
- Assess internal media-relations capabilities.
- Recognize that all communication activities and materials should reflect the diverse nature of societies in a fair, representative and inclusive manner.

- Begin all communication planning efforts with clear and explicit goals – such as:
 - informing and educating;
 - improving knowledge and understanding;
 - building, maintaining or restoring trust;
 - guiding and encouraging appropriate attitudes, decisions, actions and behaviours; and
 - encouraging dialogue, collaboration and cooperation.
- Develop a written communication plan.
- Develop a partner communication strategy.
- Establish coordination in situations involving multiple agencies.
- Identify important stakeholders and subgroups within the audience as targets for your messages.
- Prepare a limited number of key messages in advance of potential public health emergencies.
- Post the key messages and supporting information on your own well-publicized web site.
- Pre-test messages before using them during an interview.
- Respect diversity and multiculturalism while developing messages.
- Train key personnel – including technical staff – in basic, intermediate and advanced media communication skills.
- Practise media communication skills regularly.
- Never say anything “off-the-record” that you would not want to see quoted and attributed to you.
- Recruit media spokespersons who have effective presentation and personal interaction skills.
- Provide training for high-ranking government officials who play a major role in communication with the media.
- Provide well-developed talking points for those who play a leading role in communication with the media.
- Recognize and reward spokespersons who are successful in getting their key messages included in media stories.
- Anticipate questions and issues that might be raised during an interview.
- Train spokespersons in how to redirect an interview (or get it back on track) using bridging phrases such as “what is really important to know is...”.
- Agree with the reporter in advance on logistics and topic – for example, the length, location, and specific topic of the interview – but realize that the reporter may attempt to stray from the agreed topic.
- Make needed changes in strategy and messages based on monitoring activities, evaluation efforts and feedback.
- Work proactively to frame stories rather than waiting until others have defined the story and then reacting.
- Carefully evaluate media communication efforts and learn from mistakes.
- Share with others what you have learned from working with the media.

3. Meet the functional needs of the media

- Assess the needs of the media.
- Be accessible to reporters.
- Respect their deadlines.
- Accept that news reports will simplify and abbreviate your messages.
- Devise a schedule to brief the media regularly during an emergency, even if updates are not “newsworthy” by their standards – open and regular communication helps to build trust and fill information voids.

- Refer journalists to your web site for further information.
- Share a limited number of key messages for media interviews.
- Repeat your key messages several times during news conferences and media interviews.
- Provide accurate, appropriate and useful information tailored to the needs of each type of media, such as sound bites, background videotape, and other visual materials for television.
- Provide background material for reporters on basic and complex issues on your web site and as part of media information packets and kits.
- Be careful when providing numbers to reporters – these can easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood.
- Stick to the agreed topic during the interview – do not digress.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, focus on what you do know, tell the reporter what actions you will take to get an answer, and follow up in a timely manner.
- If asked for information that is the responsibility of another individual or organization, refer the reporter to that individual or organization.
- Offer reporters the opportunity to do follow-up interviews with subject-matter experts.
- Strive for brevity, but respect the reporter’s desire for information.
- Hold media availability sessions where partners in the response effort are available for questioning in one place at one time.
- Remember that it benefits the reporter and the agency when a story is accurate.
- Before an emergency occurs, meet with editors and with reporters who would cover the story.
- Work to establish durable relationships with reporters and editors.
- Promise only that which can be delivered, then follow through.

4. Be candid and open with reporters

- Be first to share bad news about an issue or your organization, but be sure to put it into context.
- If the answer to a question is unknown or uncertain, and if the reporter is not reporting in real time, express a willingness to get back to the reporter with a response by an agreed deadline.
- Be first and proactive in disclosing information about an emergency, emphasizing appropriate reservations about data and information reliability.
- Recognize that most journalists maintain a “healthy scepticism” of sources, and trust by the media is earned – do not ask to be trusted.
- Ask the reporter to restate a question if you do not understand it.
- Hold frequent media events to fill information voids.
- Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk.
- Acknowledge uncertainty.
- Be careful about comparing the risk of one event to another.
- Do not offer unreasonable reassurances (i.e. unwarranted by the available information).
- Make corrections quickly if errors are made or if the facts change.
- Discuss data and information uncertainties, strengths and weaknesses – including those identified by other credible sources.
- Cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate.
- Support your messages with case studies and data.
- If credible authorities disagree on the best course of action, be prepared to disclose the rationale for those disagreements, and why your agency has decided to take one particular course of action over another.
- Be especially careful when asked to speculate or answer extreme or baseless “what if” questions, especially on worst-case scenarios.
- Avoid speaking in absolutes.
- Tell the truth.

5. Listen to the target audience

- Do not make assumptions about what viewers, listeners and readers know, think or want done about risks.
- If time and resources allow, prior to a media interview, review the available data and information on public perceptions, attitudes, opinions, beliefs and likely responses regarding an event or risk. Such information may have been obtained through interviews, facilitated discussion groups, information exchanges, expert availability sessions, public hearings, advisory group meetings, hotline call-in logs, and surveys.
- Monitor and analyse information about the event appearing in media outlets, including the internet.
- Identify with the target audience of the media interview, and present information in a format that aids understanding and helps people to act accordingly.
- During interviews and news conferences, acknowledge the validity of people's emotions and fears.
- Be empathetic.
- Target media channels that encourage listening, feedback, participation and dialogue.
- Recognize that competing agendas, symbolic meanings, and broader social, cultural, economic or political considerations often complicate the task of effective media communication.
- Recognize that although public health officials may speak in terms of controlling "morbidity and mortality" rates, more important issues for some audiences may be whether people are being treated fairly in terms of access to care and medical resources.

6. Coordinate, collaborate and act in partnership with other credible sources

- Develop procedures for coordinating the activities of media spokespersons from multiple agencies and organizations.
- Establish links to the web sites of partner organizations.
- Recognize that every organization has its own culture and this culture impacts upon how and what it tries to communicate.
- To the extent possible, act in partnership with other organizations in preparing messages in advance of potential emergencies.
- Share and coordinate messages with partner organizations prior to media interviews or news conferences.
- Encourage partner organizations to repeat or echo the same key messages – such repetition and echoing by many voices helps to reinforce the key messages for target audiences.
- In situations involving multiple agencies, determine information clearance and approval procedures in advance when possible.
- Aim for consistency of key messages across agencies – if real differences in opinion do exist be inclined to disclose the areas of disagreement and explain why your agency is choosing one course of action over another.
- Develop a contingency plan for when partners cannot engage in consistent messaging – be prepared to make an extra effort to listen to their concerns, understand their point of view, negotiate differences, and apply pressure if required and appropriate.
- Devote effort and resources to building bridges, partnerships and alliances with other organizations (including potential or established critics) before an emergency occurs.
- Consult with internal and external partners to determine which organization should take the lead in responding to media enquiries, and document the agreements reached.
- Discuss ownership of specific topics or issues in advance to avoid one partner treading upon the perceived territory of another.

- Identify credible and authoritative sources of information that can be used to support messages in potential emergencies.
- Develop a plan for using information from other organizations in potential emergencies.
- Develop contact lists of external subject-matter experts able and willing to speak to the media on issues associated with potential emergencies.
- Cite as part of your message credible and authoritative sources that believe what you believe.
- Issue media communications together with, or through, individuals or organizations believed to be credible and trustworthy by the target audience.

7. Speak clearly and with compassion

- Be aware that people want to know that you care before they care what you know.
- Use clear, non-technical language.
- Explain medical or technical terms in clear language when they are used.
- Use graphics or other pictorial material to clarify and strengthen messages.
- Respect the unique information needs of special and diverse audiences.
- Express genuine empathy when responding to questions about loss – acknowledge the tragedy of illness, injury or death.
- Personalize risk data by using stories, narratives, examples and anecdotes that make technical data easier to understand.
- Avoid distant, abstract and unfeeling language about harm, deaths, injuries and illnesses.
- Acknowledge and respond (in words, gestures and actions) to the emotions people express, such as anxiety, fear, worry, anger, outrage and helplessness.
- Acknowledge and respond to the distinctions people view as important in evaluating risks, such as perceived benefits, control, fairness, dread, whether the risk is natural or man-made, and effects on children.
- Be careful to use risk comparisons only to help put risks in perspective and context, and not to suggest that one risk is like another – avoid comparisons that trivialize the problem, that attempt to minimize anxiety, or that appear to be trying to settle the question of whether a risk is acceptable.
- Give people a sense of control by identifying specific actions they can take to protect themselves.
- Identify significant misinformation, being aware that repeating it may give it unwanted attention.
- Recognize that saying “no comment” without explanation or qualification is often perceived as guilt or hiding something – consider saying instead “I wish I could answer that. However...”.
- Be sensitive to local norms, such as those relating to speech and dress.
- Always try to include in a media interview a discussion of actions under way by the agency, or actions that can be taken by the public.