Risk Communication

by Vivian Krause

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What is Risk Communication?

Risk communication is a science-based approach for communicating effectively in high-stakes, emotionally charged, controversial situations.

Risks are not all perceived in the same way.

Effective risk communication begins with understanding risk perception.
“People are disturbed not by things but by their view of them.”

- Epicteus, First Century Philosopher.
We take a “rose-tinted view” if a risk is:

- Natural (not man-made)
- Voluntary (not imposed)
- Familiar
- Common
- Certain
- Not dreaded
- If we get benefits in association with the risk.
- If we trust the perpetrators of the risk.
We take a **darker view** if a risk is:

- Industrial or unnatural
- Involuntary, imposed
- Unfamiliar, uncommon, rare
- Associated with negative images
- Gets negative media attention
- Dreaded
- Unassociated with benefits, unfair
- Considered morally wrong (eg. harmful to children)
Many risk perception factors are *unrelated* to the risk itself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosocial factors</th>
<th>Other factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Cognitive abilities</td>
<td>• Age, gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Over-confidence/unrealistic optimism</td>
<td>• Socio-economic status</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Apathy</td>
<td>• Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Preference for certainty</td>
<td>• World view</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reluctance to change strong beliefs</td>
<td>• Lifestyle</td>
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- **TRUST**  

- Outrage
“Outrage Factors”

• Feelings of broken trust and betrayal
• Not being listened to, feeling ignored or dismissed
• Discourtesy
• Secrecy, bias, suspicion of conspiracy
• Double standards, inconsistencies and favouritism

Outrage taints risk perception.
It follows that …

**Risk = Hazard + Outrage**

Hazard = Environmental, health & other “technical” issues
Outrage = Public concern.

- Peter Sandman
If Risk = Hazard + Outrage

Managing Risk = Managing Hazard + Managing Outrage

If both hazards and outrage are present, manage both:

- Hazard Management for Hazards
- Outrage Management for Outrage

- Peter Sandman
The Business Case for Outrage Management

1. High Outrage = High Risk.

2. Under-managing Outrage puts pressure on government and industry to over-manage Hazards. That’s costly.

3. Angry people won’t notice the good things that you do.

4. Prevent staff burn-out.

5. Avoid litigation.
Despite the strong business case, Outrage Management is very difficult:

• The playing field isn't level; the public's expectations of industry and of environmentalists are not the same. It feels unfair.

• Its counter-intuitive.

• Routine operation of the business and Outrage Management may be inherently at odds.
Key Tactics for Effective Risk Communication When People Are Outraged

When public opinion is bad even though risk management is good
1. Know what you are up against

- The type of scenario you are in.
- The determinants of trust in Low vs. High Concern.
- The see-saw effect.
- Check your assumptions.

“Its what you find out after you know everything that matters.”

- Peter Drucker
Reputation = **Performance +/- Perception**

The toughest scenario is “C”, Good Performance/Bad Perception.
Each scenario requires a unique strategy.

Many problems come from using a Low Concern strategy (eg. Conventional P.R.) when you are in a High Concern scenario.
Determinants of Trust in Low and High Concern Situations

Low Concern

- 85% Competence Expertise
- 15% All Other Factors

High Concern

- 50% Empathy
- 15-20% Commitment Dedication
- 15-20% Openness Honesty
- 15-20% Competence Expertise

“People will care what you know when they know that you care.”

A Unique Strategy for Each Scenario

Low Concern, High Trust

- Sell your strengths
- Don’t repeat the negatives
- Speak with one voice

Authority, Credentials & Expertise

High Concern, Low Trust

- Listening is priority #1
- Acknowledge problems
- Let diversity of opinion show

Authenticity, Credibility & Experience
The Seesaw Effect

High Concern/Low Trust is a playground (or battleground! ) of “seesaws.”

When people are seeing both sides of an issue and are ambivalent about which side to take, they tend to take the side that the other party doesn't. Blame, for instance, works like a seesaw. The more you blame yourself, the less others will blame you.

A middle-ground position decreases polarity, emotional charge and controversy.

An extreme position increases polarity, emotional charge and controversy.

Take a middle-ground position.

- Adapted from Peter Sandman
2. Listen

“We Hear You. We’re Listening. We Care.”

“Its amazing what you hear when you listen” - BC Hydro

“We’re listening

We strive to provide exceptional service throughout our store and we’d appreciate hearing from you. We welcome your feedback and will make every effort to address your concerns, answer your questions, or forward any compliments you wish to pass along to our staff.

If we have failed to meet your expectations in any way, or if you have any suggestions as to how we can better serve you, please speak with one of our staff members or take a few minutes to answer the questions inside this card and leave it at our Customer Service desk. Thank you.

“Still thinking about the forest fires and how you can help rebuild? Us too.” - TELUS

“Having a good corporate ear is as important as a good corporate mouth.”

- Peter Sandman
3. Acknowledge:

- What you *don't* know, not only what you *do*.
- What has gone wrong in the past.
- What people *think* has gone wrong in the past.
- What it is that makes people think the way that they do.
- Anything that predisposes people to feel the way they do.

Acknowledgement is to Outrage Management what Location is to Real Estate:

“Acknowledge, Acknowledge, Acknowledge.”
4. Talk the Walk

- Acknowledge risks, describe mitigation.
- Acknowledge negative perceptions.
- Talk straight.

It's as important to “talk the walk” as it is to “walk the talk.”
Tone

• Be candid and self-critical.
• Give a point, take a point.
• Avoid claiming too much.

"People won't remember what you say but they will remember how you made them feel."
- Carl Beuchner
Put others in a position to praise you rather than do it yourself.

Get people saying, “Yeah, they get it,” not “yeah right.”

The important message to send is “we get it.”

Enbridge says, “the last thing these salmon need are more obstacles.”

“If you are a lady you don’t need to say so.”
5. Tell the bad news too:

- When things go wrong, acknowledge it.
- Apologize.
- Commit to not make the same mistake.

Short term pain for long term gain.
6. Understand the media, meet its needs

- What the media wants is timely, human interest stories.
- Most news is about blame, fear and outrage - not about risk.
- Tone is more important than technical information.

“The media is like a dog. Either you feed it or it will go through your garbage. Either way, it will eat.”

- An NBC Correspondent.
7. Avoid undermining yourself by:

- Over-stating, over-reassuring, over-confidence, over-optimism and over-promising.
- Skirting, dodging, down-playing, trivializing, dismissing or ignoring an issue.
- Failing to acknowledge moral issues and/or the “worst case scenario.”
- A perceived cavalier or callous attitude.
- Whining about the media.
- Over-simplifying or exaggeration.
- Trying to back-date your reputation.
- Inappropriate risk comparisons

Taking a defensive position is usually offensive.
Beyond Risk Communication:

• Share control with stakeholders and local communities

• Get behind-the-scenes issues on the table

• Resolve longstanding grievances

• Do joint research

• Develop an industry and a company culture that allows the above.
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