

SPOKESPERSON

1.0 Background

Not all organizations have an official media spokesperson in place; many determine the spokesperson as each situation occurs. This presentation talks about how to select an effective spokesperson, Review the demands involved with being a spokesperson, and also provide advice and tips for the spokesperson. The participants should learn how to select an effective spokesperson, review the demands involved with being a spokesperson, and be provided with advice and tips for the spokesperson.

2.0 Media spokesperson

For proper risk communication it is recommended to designate one spokesperson, although depending on the situation, more than one may be required, due to high media interest and the duration of the response.

The media spokesperson(s) are usually technical experts who are both credible and good communicators. To maintain consistency, the number of spokespeople should be kept as soon as possible, depending on the workload. During an emergency, demands from media, local, national and international will be intense and it may not be feasible for one person to take on this role on a 24/7 basis. Where multiple spokespersons are used, it will be vital to ensure that information provided is consistent. Any inconsistencies may be picked up by media and could undermine the credibility of the emergency response.

3.0 Choosing a spokesperson

Members of the public desire information provided by an authoritative, trustworthy presenter or spokesperson capable of providing factual, independent opinions, instead of political or Government assessments of the situation.

Spokespeople should be chosen based significantly on how trusted they are. In the case of choosing spokespeople, trust is determined by:

- Responsibility. The more significant the event, the more the principle speaker should be the person who has the principle decision-making authority in information dissemination, (the person in charge).
- Expertise/competence. On technical and scientific matters, speakers who have expertise will be more trusted, and therefore have more influence, than public information officers.
- Current public perception. If a person or agency responsible for communicating already suffers from diminished trust in the minds of the public or the media, other sources of information should be chosen.

As circumstances warrant, the spokesperson may change. In case of a lengthy emergency response phase, a replacement spokesperson should be designated and shifts should be created.

Organizations need to choose spokespersons carefully to deliver information and messages. These people need to be trained and reliable communicators capable of dealing with the pressures from news media that an emergency can generate.

There are private firms that offer media training, or there may be in-house expertise to provide this training to spokespersons. Such training will need to be done in advance of an emergency with possibly a refresher given on an urgent basis when the emergency begins.

The spokesperson needs to be authoritative figures who know what is going on but they need not necessarily be the most senior figures in an organization. Often the senior figures have to deal with the incident and should not be distracted by other pressures. In major incidents being spokesperson is a full time job.

In risk communication, where emotions matter so much and trust is such a crucial factor in how worried people are and therefore how they behave, the decisions about appropriate spokespersons are different than under "normal" communication conditions.

4.0 Applying risk communications principles

4.1 Empathize and Respect the Emotions of Your Audiences: When communicating with the public, communicators must be sensitive to and acknowledge people's concerns. They should understand the specific risk perception factors that may drive those concerns. The more threatening the situation feels; the more vital this is, because chemical changes in the brain will rise as stress increases, impairing cognitive ability. The emotional impact of the emergency plays an important role in how it is perceived.

4.2 Be Honest and Open: Communicators should be upfront with information and provide as much as possible as early as possible. If some information cannot be released, as may be the case with acts of terror, they should explain the reasons why. Being honest and open means not only being truthful in what is said, but also being forthcoming with information. This helps to maintain trust relationship between the response organization and the public.

4.3 Give People Things They Can Do: Communications should strive to give people a sense of control over their own well-being. Remembering that public perception of risk decreases when there is control over the risk, event response procedures should include actions the public may take, such as places people can go for care, actual physical steps people can take to protect themselves (shelter-in-place, iodine tablets, evacuation, etc.), or ways that people can get more information and stay informed of ongoing developments. Messages should stress this type of empowering options where feasible.

4.4 Avoid Absolutes: Command-and-control organizations, like emergency response organizations, often feel they must demonstrate control by stating things firmly, such as "we have the situation under control" or "it's safe". Such absolutes may pose problems if advice or

assessments change as the emergency evolves. It will be important to provide messages that allow for changes should circumstance warrant.

4.5 Admit Uncertainty: If communicators don't know something, they should say so, rather than claiming to know and only later being found to have been less than truthful. Demonstrating honesty by acknowledging uncertainty actually creates trust, which may outweigh any questions about competence that such an admission normally might cause.

4.6 Risk Comparisons Are Risky: Because risks give rise to different emotional responses and as a consequence how they are perceived, comparing one risk to another may not be effective and may actually undermine the credibility of the communicator. This is especially the case if risks are compared on only their statistical similarity, rather than their perceived similarity. Thus comparing the cancer risk for an exposed person during an emergency to the same risk for a radiation worker would be better than comparing it to cancer risk from smoking.

4.7 Be Careful With Use of Numbers: Because risk perceptions are informed by feelings as well as facts, using only facts (statistics and numbers) ignores and discounts how people are feeling. Research has shown that even quite well-educated people often don't understand numbers. And for every statistic where there is a one-in-something chance of risk, there will be people who see themselves as the one. Numerical information can be used, but must be made simple and clear. It should only be used as one means of describing the risk, as one tool to help people assess risk for themselves rather than something definitive.

4.8 Anticipate Outrage: Where a hazard creates a sense of public outrage, it will be seen as less acceptable and perceived as a greater risk than the hazard itself. The potential for public outrage is likely with any technological emergency, such as one involving nuclear power plants or other accident with radiological technology (lost sources). To be effective, the spokesperson will have to address not only the risk in their responses to the media, but also the sense of public outrage that may be present.

5.0 Unique demands – hostility

In addition to outrage, some audiences may be hostile toward the communicator or spokesperson.

Environmental issues, like a radiation emergency, can trigger strong emotions, including anger and hostility.

Hostility is usually directed at communicators as a representative of an organization/administration, and not at the individual.

Dealing ineffectively with hostility can erode trust and credibility.

Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of hostility, control apprehension, listen, be prepared (plan, prepare, and practice presentation of the issues and anticipated questions and answers), communicate empathy and care (recognize frustrations in people, listen to them, answer carefully), track messages, etc. In general, established trust between parties, openness

and honesty in communication, timely information, good record of past relationships, all serve to counteract hostility.

5.1 Unique demands – deliberate acts

- In the event that a radiation emergency is the result of a deliberate act, the spokesperson will need to exercise care in what they communicate
- Because police or security forces may be investigating, it may not always be possible to provide as much information to the public and media
- Information provided should focus on the impacts or health effects of the contamination, not on the cause

6.0 Dealing with the media

The media officer will assist the spokesperson in preparing for an interview by ensuring the spokesperson is familiar with the interview set up (on camera—live or tape; on radio—live or tape; who else is interviewed); making sure the spokesperson is comfortable and effective in communicating the organization's messaging; coaching on body language and gestures; running through likely questions, and conducting practice interviews. The media officer may also attend the interview to take notes and provide feedback.

- All media interviews should be negotiated unless they are very routine.
- Negotiation is used to find out what the reporter is looking for, who else they have spoken to, the format of the interview.
- In negotiating the interview, the media officer should offer to provide any available background information so that the spokesperson does not have to first provide this to the reporter.

When interviewed, the spokesperson should:

- Use plain language
 - Be concise
 - Be truthful
 - Stay on message
 - Do not speculate
 - Remain calm
 - Never say “no comment”
- Television interviews may require special preparation, because body language and gestures will communicate more than what is said

- The spokesperson should receive training for on-camera work, including simulated interviews with feedback
- Even the best communicator will be self-conscious if they think they do not look professional on-camera
- Confidence is key– speak to the reporter and ignore the camera
- Once an interview has been completed, the spokesperson should provide a quick summary of any issues or concerns, particularly if there were questions that could not be answered
- The media officer should log all media interviews so that resulting reports can be monitored for accuracy

7.0 Conclusion

The importance of choosing an effective spokesperson cannot be emphasized enough; the spokesperson is the public face of the emergency response and to be effective, a spokesperson must be seen by the public as trusted and credible.

The spokesperson should have the needed technical expertise and knowledge and be trained in risk communications and media interview techniques.

Should more than one spokesperson be required, it will be vital to ensure they are providing consistent information and messaging.

A media officer should provide advice and support to the spokesperson(s) to help them deal with the intensity and volume of media interest that will result from a radiation emergency.