

Successful Risk Communications

Establishing and maintaining trust
and credibility during difficult times

NACWA Legal Seminar

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Jodi Perras, Perras & Associates

Journal News

HAMILTON CITY COUNCIL

Residents demand answers about sewer backup during June storm

Residents demand answers from city about sewer backup during June storm

The Gazette

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Oozing with controversy

Leftover sludge from water treatment plants clog heavy metals, pharmaceuticals and whatever sewer system. It's also used as fertilizer - w' experts

BY MICHELLE LALONDE, THE GAZETTE

OCTOBER 6, 2009

COM



Environment Pollution

Untreated sewage and cyanide kill thousands of fish in river Trent



IBJ BLOGS

NEWSTalk

Welcome to NewsTalk, where you weigh in on the news of the day. I host, Norm Heikens, IBJ's Focus

Drugs in our water

October 21, 2009


COMMENTS

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BOOKMARK Or happy, but don't take antidepressants?

Keys to Successful Communication During Difficult Times

- Empathy: Show that you care
 - Commitment: Defy the #1 stereotype of government
 - Competence/Expertise: Demonstrate you know what you're doing
 - Honesty/Openness: Work with the public and news media
- 

Communicating in a Crisis

- Crisis + heightened public emotions + limited access to facts + rumor, gossip, speculation, assumption, and inference = an unstable information environment.

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002)



Center for Risk Communication

- Public perceptions and opinions often determine the resolution of high concern, high stress, or emotionally charged issues
- They have a profound impact on an organization's success
- Trust and credibility are central to effective communication about topics of high concern

Key Elements of Trust & Credibility



- Center for Risk Communication, 2006

Caring/Empathy

- Empathy and caring should be expressed within the first 30 seconds
- According to research, being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for your message to be received and acted upon
- Acknowledge fear, pain, suffering, and uncertainty
 - CDC: Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders for Leaders

CBS Atlanta: Sewage Backup

- City Manager: "I haven't gone out there to see it personally because I have trained people who are out there doing it. There's no need for me to go on site to see it personally."
- Homeowner: "We've gotten more action and respect out of CBS Atlanta than we have out of the city."

How to Express Empathy

- “I can see by the number of people here tonight that you are as concerned about this issue as I am.”
- “I can see you’re upset. I’m upset, too.”
- “I know you are looking for answers to important questions here. We want answers too and we’re taking steps to get them, including”
- “Yes, I’m concerned about these studies.”
- Don’t use canned words. Speak from the heart.

CRC Study Methodology

- Scientific survey of randomly selected adults in six cities:
 - Albuquerque, New Mexico
 - Cincinnati, Ohio
 - Middlesex County, New Jersey
 - Racine County, Wisconsin
 - Raleigh/Durham, North Carolina
 - Richmond, Virginia

Some CRC Survey Findings

- Defying a negative stereotype is key to improving perceptions of trust and credibility
 - For Industry: Demonstrating care and concern for people, regardless of profits
 - For Government: Demonstrating commitment and dedication to resolving a problem
 - For Advocacy Groups: Demonstrating knowledge and expertise

Commitment/Dedication

- We did all we could to protect lives and property
- During the storm, we responded quickly by ...
- We're now working 24 hours a day to ...
- We are dedicated to working on long-term solutions that will prevent this from happening again

Dedicated & Competent Leader

- “[The President] sent one John Wayne dude down here that can get some stuff done, and his name is Gen. Honoré. And he came off the doggone chopper, and he started cussing and people started moving. And he's getting some stuff done.”
 - New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin on Lt. Gen. Russel Honore



Competence/Expertise

- If you have a title and are part of the official response to a crisis, the public will assume you are competent until you prove otherwise.
- It's not necessary to recite your entire resume
- According to research, most people believe that a person holds a professional position because they are experienced and competent.
 - CDC-By Leaders and For Leaders

Demonstrating Expertise

- We have procedures for this type of event
- All procedures were followed
- We are reviewing procedures to make sure this doesn't happen again
- We are following all environmental laws and regulations
- We are keeping up on the latest research so we can protect public health, but there's a lot we don't know yet
- Bring in an independent expert: health department, university, science community, etc.

What You Want to Hear

- “It looks like they did an incredible job. It looks like a picture-perfect response. They handled everything exactly correctly.”



Honesty/Openness

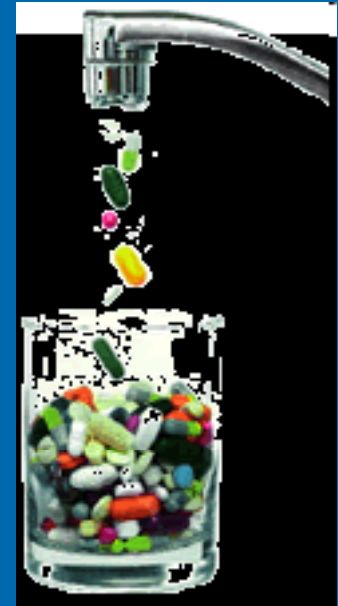
- Research by CDC and 5 universities found:
 - *Any* information is empowering,
 - Uncertainty is more difficult to deal with than knowing a bad thing; and
 - Participants are prepared to go to multiple sources for information.

Avoid Paternalistic Attitudes


- Don't answer the public's concerns with a "don't worry little lady, we got ya covered"
- Help the public to reach the same conclusion you did by sharing with them what you learned to reach that conclusion
- Have an open, quick channel with the news media
- Treat the public like intelligent adults and they will act like intelligent adults

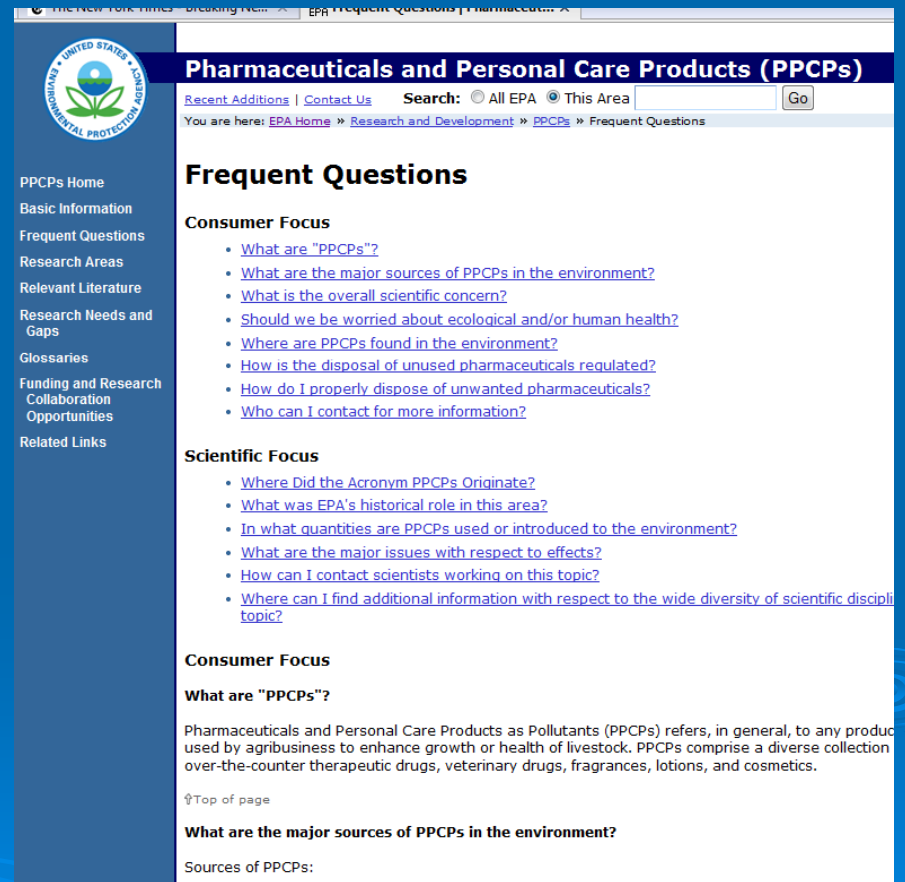
AP Report on Drugs in Water

- City water officials declined repeated requests for an interview.
- Some said drugs had not been detected, but AP found independent studies that indicated otherwise
- Some refused to identify the name of drugs they had detected
- AP: The head of a group representing major California water suppliers said the public "doesn't know how to interpret the information" and might be unduly alarmed



EPA Response

 "We recognize it is a growing concern and we're taking it very seriously," said Benjamin H. Grumbles, assistant administrator for water at U.S. EPA.



Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products (PPCPs)

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Frequent Questions

Consumer Focus

- [What are "PPCPs"?](#)
- [What are the major sources of PPCPs in the environment?](#)
- [What is the overall scientific concern?](#)
- [Should we be worried about ecological and/or human health?](#)
- [Where are PPCPs found in the environment?](#)
- [How is the disposal of unused pharmaceuticals regulated?](#)
- [How do I properly dispose of unwanted pharmaceuticals?](#)
- [Who can I contact for more information?](#)

Scientific Focus

- [Where Did the Acronym PPCPs Originate?](#)
- [What was EPA's historical role in this area?](#)
- [In what quantities are PPCPs used or introduced to the environment?](#)
- [What are the major issues with respect to effects?](#)
- [How can I contact scientists working on this topic?](#)
- [Where can I find additional information with respect to the wide diversity of scientific disciplines?](#)

Consumer Focus

What are "PPCPs"?

Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products as Pollutants (PPCPs) refers, in general, to any product used by agribusiness to enhance growth or health of livestock. PPCPs comprise a diverse collection over-the-counter therapeutic drugs, veterinary drugs, fragrances, lotions, and cosmetics.

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What are the major sources of PPCPs in the environment?

Sources of PPCPs:

Sewer Backup Issue

- Insurance adjusters denied damage claims because the storm was classified as a one in 500-year deluge that no municipal sewage system could handle.
- Public Works Director “John Doe” said he doesn’t know why sewers backed up in certain areas of the city. He said there are suspicions for causes, but declined to elaborate because of legal considerations.

Crisis Communications

1. An expression of empathy
 2. Confirmed facts and action steps
 3. What you don't know about the situation
 4. What's the process
 5. Statement of commitment
 6. What people can do & where they can get more information
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Market Square Arena Asbestos

- TV “I-Team” reports that asbestos is found downtown after implosion of Market Square Arena
- Source: Asbestos removal contractor on Air Board
- We found their sampling was done incorrectly
- Collected our own samples
- Involved IDEM and U.S. EPA asbestos experts and health department in reviewing results
- Presented all information to Air Board



Building Trust & Credibility

Five Rules:

1. Accept and involve the public as a partner
2. Appreciate the public's specific concerns
3. Be honest and open. Once lost, trust and credibility are almost impossible to regain
4. Work with other credible sources
5. Meet the needs of the media

 (Covello and Allen, 1988)

Sources of Information

- *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials* (2002), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002
- *Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication: By Leaders For Leaders*, Center for Disease Control & Prevention
- *A Study of Trust and Credibility Factors*, Center for Risk Communications, 1997

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