

Crisis Communication III: Involving the Public

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(*Traducción en Español -- <http://www.psandman.com/handouts/sand12cS.pdf>*)

15. Tell people what to expect.

“Anticipatory guidance” -- telling people what to expect -- does raise some anxiety, especially if you’re predicting bad news. But being forewarned helps us cope, it keeps us from feeling blindsided or misled, and it reduces the dispiriting impact of sudden negative events. Warning people to expect uncertainty and possible error is especially useful. So is warning people about their own likely future reactions, particularly the ones they may want to overrule: “You’ll probably feel like stopping the medicine before it’s all gone.”

16. Offer people things to do.

Self-protective action helps mitigate fear; victim-aid action helps mitigate misery. All action helps us bear our emotions, and thus helps prevent them from escalating into panic, flipping into denial, or declining into hopeless apathy. Plan for this well in advance; mid-crisis is a harder time to start figuring out what to offer people to do -- including the legions of volunteers who will want to help.

17. Let people choose their own actions.

Offering people a choice of actions recruits not just their ability to act, but also their ability to decide. This makes it all the more empowering as a bulwark against panic or denial. Ideally, bracket your action recommendations with less and more extreme options, so people who are less concerned or more concerned than you wish they were do not need to define themselves as rebels; you have recommendations for them too.

18. Ask more of people.

In a crisis, pro-social, resilient impulses vie for dominance with less desirable impulses: panic, passivity, selfishness. Ally with the former against the latter by asking more of people. Ask for people’s help before the crisis as well as during it. Ask them to help their community and their neighbors (and your organization), not just themselves -- but do ask them to help themselves. Ask more of people emotionally too. Give us “permission” to find the situation unbearable, but make it clear that you expect we will be able to bear it.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) -- www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/articles/dilemmas.pdf
- Duct Tape Risk Communication (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/ducttape.htm
- “Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS” -- And So It Should! (Apr 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm

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