

Four Reasons Why People Learn Risk Information – or Anything Else

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1. Learning Without Involvement

If you can repeat a message often enough, people will learn it the way they learn advertising jingles – without needing to pay attention.

Problem: Requires endless repetition, and therefore a big budget.

2. Curiosity

If it is interesting enough, children and sometimes even adults can have their interest captured by something they didn't especially want to learn.

Problem: Busy people are curious only occasionally and briefly – and it's hard to be that interesting.

3. Dissonance Reduction

When people are already committed to a point of view, they collect ammunition to reduce their cognitive dissonance: to support their viewpoint and prove themselves right.

Problem: Works only with your allies; your enemies are collecting ammunition against you, and neutrals have no dissonance to reduce.

4. Pending Decision

When people face a decision they must make, they collect information to guide the decision.

Problem: Requires power-sharing. If you won't share the power, they won't have a decision to make.

Outrage Weakens All Motivations To Learn

Outraged publics are psychologically guarded against learning without involvement and curiosity; their dissonance biases them against you; even if they face a decision they will want to make it against you.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Testing the Role of Technical Information in Public Risk Perception (Fall 1992) – www.psandman.com/articles/johnson1.htm
- Quantitative Risk Communication: Explaining the Data (1994) – <http://www.vimeo.com/20676915>

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