

# Risk Communication



Goal:

To be able to design, disseminate and measure the effectiveness of risk communication messages

# Risk Definitions



## ⌘ Risk:

- ☑ the probability that a natural, technological, or civil threat to people, property, and the environment will occur (Godschalk, 1991)
- ☑ risks are constant, there is always a risk of something!

## ⌘ Risk Communications:

- ☑ the design and delivery of information about a risk so the public can take appropriate action
  - ☒ Evacuate
  - ☒ Take protective actions
  - ☒ Listen for updates

# Crisis Definitions



## ⌘ Crisis:

- ☑ a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name (Fearn-Banks, 1996)
- ☑ crises last a finite period of time

## ⌘ Crisis Communication:

- ☑ the dissemination of responsive messages to a crisis which explain degree of situation and action steps to take

# Risk Communication Involves:



- ⌘ Community emergency plans
- ⌘ Organizational preparation
- ⌘ Internal & external communication
- ⌘ Media relations
- ⌘ Coordination between local, state & federal agencies
- ⌘ PIO measurement of public reaction
  - ☑ media monitoring
  - ☑ public acceptance of messages

# Risk vs. Emergency Public Information



## RISK

- ⌘ Awareness campaign
- ⌘ Storm watches
- ⌘ Preparedness guides
- ⌘ Home safety tips
- ⌘ Neighborhood watch
- ⌘ Others . . . ?

## EMERGENCY

- ⌘ EAS messages
- ⌘ Storm warnings
- ⌘ Evacuations
- ⌘ Boil-water orders
- ⌘ Amber alerts
- ⌘ Others . . . ?

# Key Elements to Risk Communications



## ⌘ Risk messages impact:

- ☑ Health, safety, security, lifestyle, quality of life, feeling of well-being

## ⌘ Delivery systems

- ☑ TV, radio, web, brochures, speeches, etc.

## ⌘ Measurement of acceptance

- ☑ Did the public act appropriately to message?

# Types of Risk



## ⌘ Natural

- ☑ Storms

- ☑ West Nile virus, SARS

- ☑ Floods

- ☑ Forest fires

# Types of Risk (continued)



## ⌘ Man-made risks

### ☒ Fires:

- ☒ Arson, explosions, human negligence

### ☒ Nuclear power plants

### ☒ Terrorism

# Types of Risk (continued)



## ⌘ Societal risks (often seasonal)

- ☑ Related to health, family safety
- ☑ Flu season, chimney fire prevention
- ☑ Sun exposure / skin cancer
- ☑ Crime, DARE programs
- ☑ Home security tips, fire escape routes

# Risk Messages: Where do they come from?



## ⌘ Originate from:

- ☑ Interest groups or government agencies
- ☑ Newsmakers, politicians
- ☑ News and popular media
- ☑ Others . . . ?

# Media & Risk Communication



- ⌘ Interested in more immediate risk
- ⌘ Will assist in risk alerts as 'news'
- ⌘ May become annual risk message partner
  - ☑ TV station co-sponsor of Hurricane Preparation Booklets
- ⌘ May expand news coverage beyond PIO risk release

# Media Strategies & Risk: Getting the Message Out!



- ⌘ Television messages seen as most credible
- ⌘ Radio typically reaches persons 'on-the-go'
- ⌘ Printed media: Brings 'hometown' local support
- ⌘ Web pages beneficial for expanded explanation

# Public Perceptions



- ⌘ Remember: perception becomes reality
- ⌘ Public does not typically anticipate emergencies
  - ☑ Must be alerted
- ⌘ Public response to risk based on closeness of threat
- ⌘ Overuse of message leads to complacency & rejection
- ⌘ TV coverage may amplify situation

# Risk Message Design Process



- ⌘ Use Standard 5 W's + H

  - ☑ Who, What, When, Where, Why & How

- ⌘ Identify the appropriate organization

- ⌘ Identify the risk

- ⌘ Identify and direct public in harm's way

- ⌘ Identify message based on impact /  
timeliness

# Risk Message Design Process (continued)



- ⌘ Recommend appropriate action

- ⌘ Reinforce public's ability to respond

  - ☑ 'If you take these actions, you will be safer'

- ⌘ Consider:

  - ☑ Primary, secondary audiences

  - ☑ Dynamic use of audio, video, written narrative, graphics, animation, and sound effects

# Elements of a Good Risk Message



- ⌘ Keep it simple, direct, and calm
- ⌘ Use and repeat basic action steps
- ⌘ Tell public where to get more information
- ⌘ Refine the message as time goes on
- ⌘ Avoid over-exaggeration of risk / threat
- ⌘ KEY: Tell audience when risk, crisis, or emergency is over

# Potential Problems with Risk Messages



- ⌘ Be prepared to counter 'chicken-littles' and 'ostriches'
- ⌘ Get on air quickly and correct misinformation

# Delivery Vehicles for Risk Messaging



- ⌘ PSAs
- ⌘ News releases
- ⌘ Media interviews
- ⌘ Printed brochures
- ⌘ Billboards
- ⌘ Posters
- ⌘ Emergency alerts
- ⌘ Local Internet providers
- ⌘ Home pages
- ⌘ Crisis home pages
- ⌘ Group emails
- ⌘ Live news shots
- ⌘ Public education
- ⌘ Large venue kiosks



## U.S. EPA Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication Design

Accept and involve public as legitimate partner

Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts

Listen to the public's specific concerns

Be honest, frank, and open

Coordinate / collaborate with other credible sources

Meet the needs of the media

Speak clearly and with compassion

# PIO Role: Day-to-Day



- ⌘ ID real and perceived risks
- ⌘ ID and delineate unique publics
- ⌘ Establish message delivery backups
- ⌘ Sample local opinion; ask 'what concerns you?'
- ⌘ ID supportive credible sources
- ⌘ Brief agency leadership on the risk message

# PIO During Emergency



- ⌘ Transition smoothly to crisis/emergency public information
- ⌘ Keep lines of communication open with media to promptly disseminate risk messages
- ⌘ Monitor the extent to which public reacts
  - ☑ Modify message if needed

# Post Event PIO Role



- ⌘ Identify effectiveness of risk messages
  - ☑ Observe if public acted as you urged them
  - ☑ Get feedback from friends, neighbors, public
  - ☑ If limited response, re-evaluate message
- ⌘ Rewrite risk communication messages
- ⌘ Encourage media to discuss success / limitations of crisis response

# Summary



- ⌘ Risk messages are designed to:
  - ☑ Advise public of potential threat to them
  - ☑ Explain steps to take to stay safe
  - ☑ Encourage involvement and participation
- ⌘ Be careful of risk messages that are too much, too little, too late or too soon
- ⌘ Monitor public response to your risk message