Creating a Message Map[1]

A message map can be one of the most useful of risk communication tools. It is important, however, to create well-constructed message maps in order to effectively communicate with the public by clearly explaining the situation, the risks, and the remedies. Before getting started, remember these important guidelines:

- Be prepared. Know the subject and the audience.
- Prepare your key messages. Remember, limit to three key messages and a maximum of three supporting statements for each key message.
- Keep answers short and focused.
- Speak and act with integrity. Tell the truth.

The Creation of a Message Map Can Be Separated into Eight Steps

Step 1: Identify stakeholders
The first step is to identify stakeholders. Stakeholders include the public at large as well as all interested, affected, or influential parties in a situation. Supposing the risk alert concerned influenza, stakeholders would include the public at large, health care workers, public health officials, as well as those most at risk for influenza (the elderly, for example).

Identifying stakeholders is also a crucial step of the message mapping process because risk communicators must adjust their messages to fit the needs and capabilities of an audience. A situation where the stakeholders are children/laypeople would yield a very different message map than a message map where the stakeholders are doctors or health workers.

Step 2: Identify anticipated stakeholder questions and concerns
Prepare a complete list of specific questions and concerns for each major group of stakeholders. A list of the Most Commonly Asked Questions by a Journalist is provided at the end of this document[2]. The questions that are generated or anticipated are the first tier of the message map grid. Questions and concerns typically fall into three categories, overarching questions, informational questions, and challenging questions. Overarching questions are broad in topic and are developed by the organization to analyze the general status of a situation. Informational questions ask about a specific aspect of the situation. Challenging questions are often hostile/tense in tone. Examples are:

1) *Overarching* questions: “What do people need to know?”
2) *Informational* questions: “What is the budget for your response?”
3) *Challenging* questions: “Why should we trust what you are telling us? How many people have to die before you take more aggressive action? Can you guarantee that people are safe? What are you not telling us?”

Lists of specific stakeholder questions and concerns can be generated through[3]:

- Focus groups
- Surveys

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[1] Section 5 of the original document adapted from Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Draft Report: EPA Sponsored Workshop for Water Utilities on Water Security and Message Mapping. March 2005, Atlanta, GA.
[2] The journalist questions are adapted from Section 9 of the original document.
[3] Wicker, F.W., et al. Negative Dominance in Hedonic Integration of Noun-Noun Pairs. *Motivation and Emotion* 1979; 3(2): 129-141.

- Media content analysis
- Reviews of complaint logs, hot line logs, toll free number logs, and media logs
- Focused interviews with subject matter experts
- Public meeting records, public hearing records, and legislative transcripts

Step 3: Identify frequent concerns
Make an analysis of the list of specific concerns, and identify common groups of underlying general concerns. Case studies indicate that most high-concern issues are associated with no more than 15-25 categories of concern. As part of this step, it is useful to create a matrix or table matching the stakeholders (in order of priority) with their concerns. Here is a list of common sets of concerns[4]:

- Human health
- Trust
- Safety
- Environment
- Information
- Ethics
- Economics
- Responsibility
- Legal
- Process
- Pets/livestock
- Religion
- Fairness

Step 4: Develop key messages
When preparing the messages, it is important to consider the risk communication theories[5]:

- Trust Determination
- Mental Noise
- Negative Dominance

During staff brainstorming sessions, key words should emerge for each message. Each issue should have no more than three key messages. These key messages fill in the second tier of the message map.

Step 5: Develop supporting information
The fifth step of constructing a message map is to develop supporting facts, information, or proofs for each key message. Suppose for a message map about influenza one key message was, "All high-risk groups must be vaccinated." The supporting messages in this instance would be directed to the high risk groups: the elderly, the immuno-compromised or health care workers.

These supporting messages fill in the third tier of the message map for this key message.

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[4] Covello, V.T. Risk Communication, Message Mapping, and Bio-terrorism: A New Tool for Communicating Effectively in Public Health Emergencies and Crises. To appear in *Bio-terrorism: Preparedness and Response: Ensuring Public Health Readiness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005.
[5] A description of these theories is provided in Section 3.3 of the original document.

Step 6: Conduct testing
The sixth step of message mapping is to conduct systematic pre-testing. The message testing should start by asking experts on the topic at hand, who were not involved in the original message-mapping process, to validate the accuracy of the information. Subsequently, the message map should be tested on focus groups that are representative of target stakeholders. (For instance, supposing the message map was about influenza, a focus group could be elderly citizens planning to get the flu vaccine.)

Step 7: Overarching Message Map[6]
An Overarching Message Map contains the organization's core messages. The Overarching Message Map addresses:

- What people most need to know about the issue or topic
- What to put in the opening statement at a presentation or press conference relating to the issue or topic

One method for assuring that the message of the Overarching Message Map is delivered to the audience is **bridging**. Bridging is a tool used by risk communicators to connect statements and responses in a smooth, straightforward manner. During an influenza epidemic, an example of a bridging statement might be: "I want to remind you again that the influenza vaccine is easily available at all local hospitals and clinics…"

Step 8: Delivery
The key to successful delivery is anticipation, preparation, and practice. Once the message map has been pre-tested, it should be delivered through a trained spokesperson through suitable media (i.e. a news conference or a recorded reply in emergency telephone lines, etc.). The stakeholders must feel that their concerns are treated seriously. Audiovisual aids are often very helpful in a presentation.

The presentation sequence should follow these guidelines[7]:

1. Introduction
Perceived empathy is a vital factor in establishing trust and building credibility, and it is assessed by your audience in the first 9-30 seconds. Include a statement of concern, a statement of organizational intent, and a statement of purpose and plan for the meeting.

2. Key messages and supporting data
Stress the three key messages you want the public to have in mind after the meeting. Then mention the supporting data, which amplifies, clarifies, or bolsters the key messages.

3. After the presentation
After the speaker has given all the information contained in the message map, he must answer questions from the media and stakeholders. The speaker should prepare before- hand answers to some common, anticipated questions and concerns from the press and stakeholders.

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[6] Covello, V.T. Risk Communication, Message Mapping, and Bio-terrorism: A New Tool for Communicating Effectively in Public Health Emergencies and Crises. To appear in *Bio-terrorism: Preparedness and Response: Ensuring Public Health Readiness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005
[7] Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO). Communication in Risk Situations: Responding to the Communication Challenges Posed by Bioterrorism and Emerging Infectious Diseases. Accessed at the URL http://www.astho.org/index.php?template=risk_communication.html, on December 8, 2005.

Most Frequently Asked Questions by Journalists During a Crisis[8]

1. What is your name, title, job responsibilities and qualifications?
2. Can you tell us what happened, and when and where it happened?
3. How many people were harmed?
4. Are those that were harmed getting help?
5. How certain are you about this information?
6. Is the situation under control?
7. Is there any immediate danger?
8. What is being done in response to what happened?
9. What are you advising people to do?
10. How long will it be before the situation returns to normal?
11. Can the situation worsen? What is the worst case scenario?
12. What help has been requested or offered from others?
13. What responses have you received?
14. How much damage occurred and what additional damage do you expect?
15. Who else is involved in the response?
16. Why did this happen?
17. What was the cause?
18. Did you have any forewarning that this might happen?
19. Can the situation worsen?
20. If you are not sure of the cause, what is your best guess?
21. Who is to blame?
22. Could this have been avoided?
23. Do you think those involved handled the situation well enough?
24. Who is conducting the investigation?
25. What have you found out so far?
26. Why was more not done to prevent this from happening?
27. What is your personal opinion?
28. Are people overreacting?
29. Has anyone broken the law?
30. What are you not telling us?
31. What effects will this have on the people involved?
32. What precautionary measures were taken?
33. Do you accept responsibility for what happened?
34. Has this ever happened before?
35. Can this happen elsewhere?
36. What lessons were learned and were they implemented?
37. What can be done to prevent this from happening again?
38. What would you like to say to those that have been harmed and their families?
39. Are people out of danger? Are people safe?
40. Will there be inconvenience to employees or to the public?
41. How much will all this cost?
42. Are you able and willing to pay the costs?
43. Who else will pay the costs?
44. What does this all mean?

[8] Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO). Communication in Risk Situations: Responding to the Communication Challenges Posed by Bioterrorism and Emerging Infectious Diseases. Accessed at the URL http://www.astho.org/index.php?template=risk_communication.html, on December 8, 2005.