
Risk communication and community engagement

27 November 2024

Varun Chaudhary

Communications Officer

What is risk communications

Risk communication, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is an essential component of public health that involves conveying information about health risks to affected populations and stakeholders. It aims to inform and guide people in making decisions about their health and safety, especially during emergencies such as disease outbreaks, natural disasters, or environmental hazards.

Effective risk communication is crucial in managing public health crises.

- Inform and educate the public about health risks and protective measures.
- Reduce fear and anxiety by providing clear, accurate information.
- Encourage compliance with health recommendations and interventions.
- Build community resilience and trust in health authorities.

Risk communication emphasizes the need for clear, transparent, and engaging communication strategies that empower communities to respond effectively to health risks.

So what makes risk communications differ?

- Purpose,
- content, and
- audience engagement

Purpose

- **Communication** refers to the exchange of information, messages or even ideas between individuals or groups. It can be for a variety of purposes such as education, entertainment or social connection. The main goal is to share or convey information, and most effectively.
- **Risk communication** focuses on conveying information about risks, particularly potential dangers or hazards with the goal to help people understand, evaluate, and respond to risks—whether environmental, health-related, or societal. It aims to inform people about the uncertainty or potential harm while guiding them toward making informed decisions.

Content

- **Communication** can cover any subject, from casual conversations to formal presentations. It can be about sharing ideas, feelings, opinions, or factual data.
- **Risk communication** focuses specifically on explaining risk factors, probabilities, consequences, and recommendations. It involves discussing issues like safety, health risks (pandemics); environmental threats (climate change). Often, it involves technical or scientific data.

Audience engagement

- **Communication** can involve a wide range of audiences and may or may not require active engagement. The audience may passively receive the message or actively participate, depending on the context and media.
- **Risk communication** often requires more careful consideration of the audience's perceptions, trust, and understanding of the risks. It involves building trust, addressing fear, uncertainty, and confusion, and encouraging informed decision-making. It often seeks to be transparent, empathetic, and clear - to avoid miscommunication or **PANIC!**

Nature of information

- Information can be positive, neutral, or negative depending on the context, and is often delivered in a balanced or straightforward manner.
- **Risk communication** emphasizes the uncertainty of outcomes, possible dangers, and the consequences of inaction. It deals with both known and unknown risks, and often involves framing uncertain situations in a way that guides the audience on what to do next to mitigate harm.

Example:

- A general news broadcast discussing the weather for the day in a particular city/country.
- An official or expert explaining the risks of climate change or an outbreak; and sharing an advisory on what the public can do to protect themselves (e.g. stay indoors, social distancing, wearing masks, vaccination).

Few more for good measure...

A manager sending an email to employees regarding a meeting.

“Dear Team, I would like to schedule a meeting tomorrow at 10a.m. to discuss our quarterly goals.”

An organization posting about a new product launch on social media

"Exciting news! Our new smartwatch is launching next week. Stay tuned for more details! Follow us on www.whatishappening.com"

Media airing a news update

“Good evening, I’m Mr Communications! In today's headlines, The government officials met today to discuss the upcoming budget and its intention to declare war on sugary drinks and unhealthy food.”

A teacher explaining the fundamentals of communications.

“Communications is the process of exchanging information or ideas between two or more people. Let’s continue...”

Communicating the risk of an infectious disease.

“There has been an increase in flu cases this season. The WHO recommends getting vaccinated to reduce your risk.”

A government agency warning about an approaching cyclone.

“A category-IV cyclone is expected to hit the Eastern coast in the next 48 hours. Authorities advise residents to evacuate low-lying areas and take precautions to secure homes. Stay tuned for more updates.”

Warning about air pollution levels and health risks.

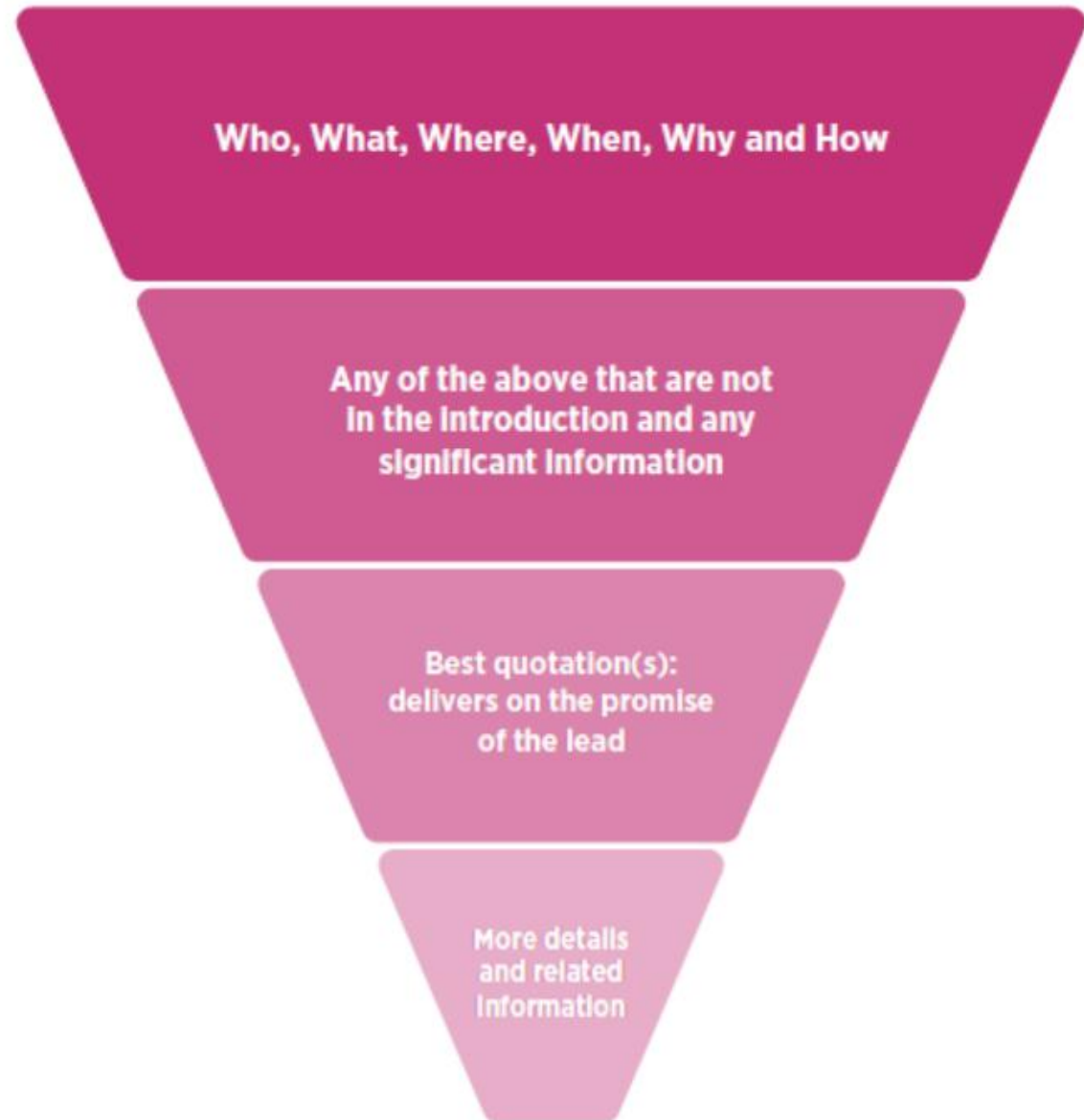
“Air quality has reached hazardous levels in New Delhi, India due to stubble burning and vehicular emissions. The government has advised children, the elderly and people with respiratory issues should avoid outdoor activities and remain indoors.”

Sandman theory

It is based on the work of Peter Sandman, a prominent figure in the field of risk communication. Sandman's theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the public's perception of risk and the psychological factors that influence how people respond to risks.

Risk = Hazard + Outrage

Inverted pyramid
is an easy, simple tool of
communications.



“A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Visual storytelling

Emotion and engagement: Photographs can evoke emotions and create a connection with the audience. Powerful images can engage viewers, making them more likely to pay attention to the accompanying message about health risks.

Illustration of concepts: Complex health concepts or risks can be made more understandable through visual representation. Photographs can illustrate preventive measures, such as vaccination or hygiene practices, effectively.

Clarity and comprehension

Breaking barriers: Visuals can transcend language barriers, making health information accessible to a broader audience. A well-chosen photograph can communicate a message quickly and effectively, especially in multicultural contexts.

Highlighting impact: Photography can visually depict the consequences of health risks, such as disease outbreaks or environmental hazards. This can reinforce the seriousness of a situation and motivate action.

Credibility and trust

Authenticity: Images showing actual community members or health workers in action can foster trust and authenticity.

Humanizing the message: Photography can humanize data and statistics by showing real people affected by health issues, thereby making the information more relatable and impactful.

Documentation and evidence

Recording events: Photography can serve as documentation of health crises, showcasing the response efforts and the communities involved. This can be valuable for future reference and learning.

Visual evidence: Photographs can provide visual evidence to support health messages, such as showing the effects of diseases or the benefits of interventions like vaccination.

Social media

Viral potential: Engaging and impactful images are more likely to be shared on social media platforms, amplifying the reach of risk communication efforts.

In a world where information overload is common, compelling visuals can cut through the white noise and create a lasting impact.

Risk communication for animal health

Risk communication in animal health is essential for managing public health, protecting livestock, and ensuring the well-being of pets and wildlife.

It helps in effectively conveying information about potential risks associated with animal diseases, zoonoses (diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans) and biosecurity measures.

Vaccination campaigns

Example: Rabies vaccination initiatives

Communication strategy: Public health officials use targeted messaging to promote rabies vaccination in pets. This includes IEC material, community outreach programs and social media campaigns to inform pet owners about the risks of rabies and the importance of vaccinating pets.

Key messages: Emphasizing the fatal nature of rabies and the benefits of vaccination.

Outbreak response

Example: Avian Influenza outbreaks

Communication strategy: During outbreaks of avian influenza, veterinary authorities provide timely updates to farmers, poultry producers, and the public through press releases, informational webinars, and social media.

Key messages: Information on identifying symptoms, biosecurity measures to prevent the spread and guidance on what to do if an outbreak is suspected.

EPIC risk communication

E motive: Arouses intense feelings

P articipatory: Two-way, dynamic process

I mperfect: Recognizes uncertainty, acts even when not all information is available, open to correction as more information becomes available

C ontinuous: Always communicating, proactive



Disease Outbreak News for Rabies in Timor-Leste

Thank you