

Prepare Clear and Concise Messages

A key step in effective media communication is to develop clear and concise messages that address stakeholder questions and concerns. In addition to generating a large number of questions and concerns, controversies and crises are also likely to generate strong feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration, fear and outrage. Messages that address stakeholder concerns should therefore be based on what the target audience most needs to know or most wants to know.

One way to develop clear messages is to brainstorm with a message-development team consisting of a subject-matter expert, communication specialist, policy/legal/management expert and a facilitator. Such sessions typically produce a set of talking points and key messages.

A message map helps in the development of messages. It also serves as a “port in a storm” when questioning by journalists or others becomes intense or aggressive. Message maps allow organizations to develop messages in advance of emergencies.

A Five-Step Model for Preparing Messages

| Answers should: | By: |
|---|---|
| 1. Express empathy, listening, caring or compassion as a first statement. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using personal pronouns, such as “I” “we” “our” or “us”; ▪ Indicating through actions, body language and words that you share the concerns of those affected by events; ▪ Acknowledging the legitimacy of fear and emotion; ▪ Using a personal story - if appropriate (for example, “My family . . .”); and ▪ Bridging to the key messages. |
| 2. State the key messages. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limiting the total number of words to no more than 27; ▪ Limiting the total length to no more than 9 seconds; ▪ Using positive, constructive and solution-oriented words as appropriate; and ▪ Setting messages apart with introductory words, pauses, inflections. |
| 3. State supporting information. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using three additional facts; ▪ Using well thought out and tested visual material, including graphics, maps, pictures, video clips, animation, photographs and analogies; ▪ Using a personal story; ▪ Citing credible third parties or other credible sources of information. |
| 4. Repeat the key messages. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summarizing or emphasizing the key messages. |
| 5. Message map template | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Listing specific next steps; and ▪ Providing contact information for obtaining additional information, if appropriate. |

Stakeholder:

Question or Concern:

Key Message 1

| Supporting Information 1-1 | Key Message 2 | Key Message 3 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | | |
| Supporting Information 1-2 | Supporting Information 2-1 | Supporting Information 3-1 |
| | | |
| Supporting Information 1-3 | Supporting Information 2-2 | Supporting Information 3-2 |
| | | |
| | Supporting Information 2-3 | Supporting Information 3-3 |
| | | |

The top section of the message map identifies the stakeholder or audience for whom the messages are intended as well as the specific question or concern being addressed. The next layer of the message map contains the three (3) key messages that can function individually or collectively as a response to a stakeholder question or concern. These key messages are intended to address the information needs of a wide variety of audiences. Remember the rule of threes. It's often important to have three main points you want to make.

The final section of the message map contains supporting information arranged in blocks of three under each key message. This supporting information amplifies the key messages by providing additional facts or details. Supporting information can also take the form of visuals, analogies, personal stories or citations of credible information sources.

A message map provides multiple benefits. It provides a handy reference for leaders and spokespersons who must respond swiftly to questions on topics where timeliness and accuracy are critical. It minimizes the chance of "speaker's regret" at saying something inappropriate or not saying something that should have been said. A printed copy of the message map allows a spokesperson during interview to "check off" the talking points they want to make in order of their importance.

Source: Effective Media Communication During Public Health Emergencies, A World Health Organization Handbook, by Randall N. Hyer, World Health Organization and Vincent Covello, Center for Risk Communication.