How many times have you seen something on television, heard it on the radio, or read it in the newspaper—or in today’s world, seen it on the Internet—in which someone had to answer one tough question after another in front of an alarmed crowd? We have all experienced those situations as observers, but I would wager that not one of us has thought, “Gee, I wish I were in that person’s shoes.” Of course not! Most of us prefer being one of the crowd—not facing the crowd.

However, over the course of our professional careers, many of us in the drinking water industry will have to face the crowd—those folks we call our customers or our public—and many of us will have to answer the tough questions: Why does our water taste bad? What do you mean the water is not safe to drink today? Why do our water rates need to increase so sharply? Why do we need to build that, and what will happen if we don’t? What will my family and I do without water while the treatment plant is off line?

LEARNING THE ART OF RISK COMMUNICATION

How we answer those questions and others like them is as important as what we say in the answers. It’s all part of a science/art called risk communication, which involves public health, behavioral science, and communication. The need to be well-versed in

The three main goals of risk communication are to create trust and credibility, to educate your public, and to involve them in the decision-making process.
online, that will help water system professionals learn and practice the key principles of risk communication. Vincent T. Covello, director of the Center for Risk Communication in New York, N.Y., has extensively researched this subject. Several years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a two-day seminar developed by the Drinking Water Academy, and I found it to be incredibly insightful. According to Covello, the three main goals of risk communication are to create trust and credibility (advocacy), to educate your public, and to involve them in the decision-making process.

**RULES FOR COMMUNICATING RISK**

Covello lists seven basic rules of risk communication:

- **Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner.** Members of the public have a right to be involved in the decisions that affect them and their way of life. Today’s public is very informed and wants to stay that way. Involving the public as a legitimate partner also provides a collaborative way to solve problems.

- **Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.** Be clear and concise while also getting your point across. Keep in mind that the public can be either a broad gathering of diverse backgrounds and cultures or a very specific group of citizens. You may want to vary the method used to convey your message with each group.

- **Listen to the public’s specific concerns.** If you demonstrate a willingness to actively listen to the public’s concerns, it will elevate the level of trust its members have in you. In addition, listening to their side will often lead you to a broader understanding of the problem.

- **Be honest, frank, and open.** When you are trying to get people to believe and buy into your message, trust and credibility are paramount. If you have information they need, tell them. If you don’t have all the answers yet, say so. Above all, do not guess at conclusions, do not over- or underemphasize the magnitude of the issue, and do not admit mistakes early if any were made. Once trust and credibility are lost, it is next to impossible to get them back.

- **Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.** It will be very important for the public to know that you have partnered with the experts in a particular area and that the entire team is working together to solve the problem at hand. Few things could be worse than a panel of experts arguing with you and one another in a public meeting.

- **Meet the needs of the media.** The media can be your best ally because its function is to get your message to the public. Make sure members of the media know who to contact for the correct information, and be available to help them meet their deadlines or do live reports. It helps to keep in mind that they are often looking for a slant on a developing story as a way to gain and hold their audience’s attention.

- **Speak clearly and with compassion.** Heavy scientific language belongs in technical journals. Use words that convey your message accurately but are also understandable to your audience. Respond to the emotions of your audience as well as their views about the risk at hand. Always talk about what you can do and not about what you cannot or will not do.

Finally, in the midst of communicating risk, you may find yourself having to inform the public of things you would rather have kept to yourself. There is, however, a way to effectively communicate through such situations. For instance, you may have to publicly state, “I don’t know that answer,” but you can also follow it up with “I’ll find out and get back to you as soon as I know.” In another situation, you might also say “We made mistakes earlier, but we will fix them and find a way to prevent them from happening again.” Again, this level of communication builds a relationship with your public that is based on trust and integrity.

For additional information on risk communication, check out USEPA’s Drinking Water Academy at www.epa.gov/safewater/dwa.html and AWWA’s upcoming seminar on crisis communications at www.awwa.org/education/seminars/index.cfm?SemID=45.

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