



Engaging the Disengaged

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# The challenges

- # of people at risk for injuries, death, and property damage due to disasters is increasing
- In today's world, we're competing with tons of public messaging
- Complacency, apathy, inattention
- Language and social barriers

# More challenges

- Message not received
- Message may not be understood
- Message may not receive priority
- Denial

# Overcoming challenges with good risk communication

*Risk communication: Helping people understand the facts, in ways that are relevant to their own lives, feelings and values, so they can put the risk in perspective and make more informed choices and decisions.*

*-- From "The Need for Better Risk Communication," David Ropeik, Harvard University*

# What risk communication is not

*Risk communication is not: Telling people only what you want them to know, in order to get them to behave “rationally”, that is, the way you want them to behave.*

*-- From “The Need for Better Risk Communication,” David Ropeik, Harvard University*

# Why are people disengaged?

- Message may be inappropriate

**Example: *DON'T PANIC!***

- When an emergency happens, people engage in self-protective behavior. Even if they do something wrong, if trying to save lives, this is not panic.
- Fear is not panic.

# Why are people disengaged?

## Disaster & terrorism confusion

- Natural disasters are documented and recognized as a part of nature. Usually have warnings. Traditional services provided.
- Human-caused events are rare, unexpected. Seldom any warnings. Services related to mass casualties rather than mass damage.
- Natural disasters not a crime scene; human-caused events are.

# Why are people disengaged?

- Message focus inappropriate

People will prepare for things they think can happen to them, but do not prepare for high risk, low frequency events.



# Why are people disengaged?

People may not think the message is for them

- “Citizens” (vs. residents)
- Too generic or too specific
- Wrong time/wrong place
- “All Hazards Approach”

# Why are people disengaged?

## People don't want to hear it

- Most people are in denial. They do not want to think about anything bad happening to them.

*“Denial is not a river in Egypt, it is a state of mind”*

*-- Rocky Lopes (of long ago)*

# Engaging

- Explain what we know in simple terms
  - Avoid jargon
  - Use local language and terms
  - *Give the time – not instructions on how to build a clock*

# Engaging

- Explain what we do not know and WHY.
  - Sometimes what we don't know can be perceived as withholding information
  - Why we don't know certain things, like when an earthquake will happen, helps some increase priority for preparedness due to increased uncertainty.

# Engaging

- Provide **simple, positive, directive, and practical suggestions** that people can do inexpensively, quickly, and which involve the whole family.
- Explaining **what to do** is not the same thing as explain what *not* to do.

# Engaging

## Basic premises:

- Show and describe what to do, not what not to do.
- Ensure messages are accurate, realistic, accomplishable, and **consistent**



# Consistent Information

- People shop around for information and compare one organization's message with another.
- Standardized messaging results in a greater likelihood of desired action.
- Standardized messaging results in more positive public image and fewer questions or criticisms.

# Engaging: behavior change

- Carefully consider appeals to fear
  - While bad things can happen, research has shown that showing images of “the bad things” actually heightens denial.
  - When denial is heightened, people don’t talk about it.
  - When people do not engage in conversation by talking about it, then they do not engage in changing behavior.



# Engaging: Conversation

- Foster **conversation**

- Considering changing behavior to reduce risk exposure requires **FIRST – GET PEOPLE TALKING**
- Conversation is an ongoing process, not a one-shot deal.
- Multiple exposures to the same message are needed.
- To extend conversation to the family, the content needs to be non-threatening

# Engaging Family

- Appeals to family and routine are most effective
  - Evidence that adults get more involved if there is a threat to loved-ones than to themselves
  - Adults and caregivers put themselves at risk to save others
  - Disruption of routine and inconvenience are more of a threat than an actual disaster itself

# Summary

- Keep communication simple and directive
- Avoid exclusive and inappropriate appeals
- Focus on what to do
- Encourage ongoing conversation which fosters behavioral change

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