

“Respecting the Snowflake: A Global Perspective for Building Effective Risk Communications,” invited essay, *Know Risk* (ISBN 92-1-132024-0), Tudor Rose and United Nations/International Strategy for Disaster Reduction: January 2005

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Effectively communicating disaster risk and motivating communities to implement mitigation is growing as one of the most critical aspects of disaster reduction today. Researchers and practitioners alike often correctly identify risk reduction problems and develop solutions. The breakdown is often in how the communicator engages with the widely diverse risk populations—how these “communities within communities” that exist within urban centers and rural landscapes are accessed, informed and motivated towards change. Globalization, along with a new international focus on terrorism, is compounding communication complexities, while at the same time, expanding the risk communicator’s opportunities.

A key to success lies beyond “high tech” or “low tech” campaigns; a more holistic communications approach is to blend the use of critical new technologies with socio-cultural identities and deeply set traditions. Additionally, disaster risk communicators can borrow and employ strategies from other sectors—advertising and marketing, military, child development, and the like—to craft approaches that work for the communities at risk.

While humanity is indeed one global society, each society member is also as individual as a snowflake whose uniqueness must be addressed in order to succeed in reducing disaster risk. For change to be made, to create a sustainable life for all of society’s members, words and outreach must reflect unique and personal approaches—ones that are not universal. Risk communicators must not be afraid to fully embrace differences of religion, values and attitudes of life and death, for by doing so the communicator will reach deep inside an individual’s decision-making realm and motivate change in risk behavior, lifestyle and attitude. And that is a universally shared goal.

Communities within Communities

Unfortunately, due to time, money, agency protocols or lack of understanding of the critical role culture plays in perception and action, most disaster risk communicators utilize a generic “one message fits all” outreach approach. In doing so, critical social and cultural identities—invaluable clues to furthering the success of the risk reduction and recovery outreach effort—are lost. As a result, risk messages are not heard, or if heard, not believed or personalized. This leads to actions not being taken, losses incurred, or recovery not being as effective or timely as it could have been.

The perceptions of risk and sense of their respective capacities to effect change vary widely between, say, a 20-year old European student activist and a young African mother who tends a shop in the market. Similarly, their outlooks are quite different again from that of a 30-year old devout Catholic social worker in Latin America or a 40-year old Indian Hindu call center operator. A 50-year old Thai Buddhist monk, or a 60-year old Syrian Muslim grandfather, living with his beloved family on their farm are likely to be moved by different expressions and views of understanding.

Each of these individuals hold equally important individual perspectives of culture, community, family, spiritual beliefs, and openness to lifestyles or environmental changes. Yet all of them can make up what disaster management professionals too often simply refer to as a “community” – or perhaps even more opaque, as “stakeholders.”

Information needs to be placed into a context that makes sense to the recipient. The social, political, economic and cultural landscapes of the world’s individual audiences need to be the basic platforms from which relevant campaign strategies and messages are skillfully crafted and implemented. Winning the attention, and then maintaining the focus, of individuals at risk who are constantly being bombarded with competing personal and societal messages challenges the most experienced risk communicators. This challenge is particularly formidable if the desire is to create a sustained communication campaign, not just a single message or advertising only a particular event.

Socio-Cultural Differences

Researchers and practitioners alike often correctly identify risk reduction problems. Unfortunately, the messages addressing these issues are then created and expressed in their most fundamental form, often reflecting the culture and psychology of the creators, not the target audiences. This transfer of information, knowledge, or research is conducted without considering how the message will be heard, understood, or applied by those to whom it is directed. Often it must be asked, if the originators of the messages really know the perceptions and the real, rather than the imagined, conditions of the intended communities?

The missing step is the act of accounting for and incorporating the psychology and conditions of the target community and the uniqueness of their complex decision-making process. The vast majority of risk communication efforts are unsuccessful when practitioners or researchers ignore the ever-shifting social landscape. This common problem takes place around the world, usually resulting in increased risk exposure and a reduced momentum on the part of the communicator.

These social and cultural challenges are particularly difficult in such areas in Southeast Asia, one of the most disaster-prone areas of the world. A common risk framework can be successfully created and shared by tapping into belief structures and reflecting cultural traditions. Data can be transitioned into true intelligence, into facts that are understood and meaningful, and can serve as invaluable building blocks for educating a community on how to implement solutions developed by the researchers and practitioners.

Creating New Approaches

Movement is underway to implement risk communication campaigns that are heavily driven by the use of technology and appropriately reflect socio-cultural differences. As in Southeast Asia, throughout the Pacific Rim and the Americas, this effort is being undertaken by crafting unique and targeted risk communication strategies, outreach campaigns and messages. The effective ones are most often part of a longer campaign approach instead of

being expressed in single messages. Additionally, many communicators are forging mutually beneficial partnerships that support wider information distribution and cross-sector appeal. Technology continues to drive much of the outreach work, such as by the use of the Internet, electronic forums, or data maps created through geographical information systems.

A promising new communication focus is to incorporate the social sciences to break through the cultural barriers. This approach is successfully utilized by social marketing practices in fields such as advertising, health care and marketing. Consider a possible applied definition of social marketing to the risk communications sector: *the process through which one markets the risk communications message to a target audience by learning their cultural identifiers and crafting a customized outreach approach and message to address their uniqueness.* As in social marketing, by doing the needed homework, being other-oriented, addressing cultural indicators in the assessment stage, and risking non-traditional approaches a communications framework can be established that leads to creative, more personalized successful outreach opportunities.

Communication strategists can successfully customize their messages by taking into account the underlying psychology of the target audience and applying these factors in the message development and selection of more appropriate distribution channels. Each distribution channel, such as the Internet, mass media, and effective alternative distribution avenues including theatre, parades and street drama, are best able to meet the audience needs only to the extent that they are suited to the recipient's cultural context. This attention to cultural relevance also applies to the visual components of imagery that is used in the message, such as photographs, maps, drawings and video.

By incorporating the standard means of public awareness like newspapers, television and other print and electronic media with these innovative efforts, a more effective approach is proceeding to reach those people most at risk. This shift in outreach strategies blends traditional and non-traditional approaches, and requires doing one's homework in the community to know what most effectively penetrates the audience's psyche. It is this knowledge, shaped by sensitivity, that supplies what is wanted—and ultimately, what is needed to effect risk reduction.

Case Examples

While implementing disaster information and educational outreach efforts for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during in the 1990s we confirmed the need for such crafted approaches. Three assignments reflect the requirements of dramatically different communication strategies: first, providing relief and education in response to a super-typhoon in the Federated States of Micronesia in the Western Pacific Ocean where traditional US mainland outreach approaches and distribution networks weren't practical; second, reducing risk of winter storm preparedness with the Navajo, a Native American tribal nation, where symbols were most readily accepted by the elders; and third, in the long term disaster recovery operation of the Northridge Earthquake in Los Angeles, California, where we engaged with many diverse communities within the Los Angeles area "community". In each situation the cultural context required creative risk-taking to alter the communications approach. While mistakes were made along the way, each strategy eventually embraced the uniqueness of local populations through cultural attentiveness, research and use of non-traditional approaches.

Examples of successful, innovative applications of these approaches can now be seen in many different countries. Projects from Asia demonstrate many enthusiastic and wide-ranging activities. Such practices include art competitions in Bangladesh, disaster reduction messages painted on rickshaws in Sri Lanka, and vibrant, colorful street parades celebrating earthquake awareness in Nepal. Elsewhere, as in Central America, the use of innovative media like audio dramas, are reaching out to families and individuals affected by flooding, hurricanes and other disasters.

In the United States of America, simulation games are growing in interest. *Rim Sim* is an example of a game simulation helping to foster a new understanding of the roles of science, and building consensus in disaster recovery decision-making. It is now played by people engaged in a wide range of activities and with often distinctive outlooks (e.g. military, NGO, public sector, humanitarian, science, business and industry) in countries such as Costa Rica, Thailand and China. Projects such as these share ideas and technologies, create expanded networks, and build avenues for partnership. The outcomes of public and private sector projects can stimulate new and increased community engagement and the wider emergence of mentoring organizations to advance disaster reduction. The shared efforts can link other business sectors, countries, and global regions. There is much to learn from each other.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal is to increase implementation of disaster reduction practices in all public and private sectors of society, and importantly, business and industry. The greatest consideration though, should be shown for those people who are often most at risk—the elderly, the disabled, women and children, the poor, and others relocated from their communities of origin. By respecting the snowflake-like uniqueness of each sector, each community and each individual member of the inter-connected global community, risk communicators can gain the attention of individuals - each vulnerable in their own way or circumstances, and begin the process of supporting their movement towards safety.