



## ON THE LINE

### The Difference Between Cats and Dogs: Considering the Social Cultural Dimensions of Communicating

“This is Annie, our kitty,” I nervously tried to explain to Christina, my newly adopted 27-month-old daughter, shortly after we returned from Russia last year. Over the next few weeks, David, my husband, and I worked hard to teach her the differences between Annie, our high-strung Burmese cat, and Sonya, the big, lumbering good-natured dog next door. One day after sharing her *sippy* cup with Sonya she raced back to our house, found our shy feline family member cowering in a chair and began shoving her drinking cup into Annie’s tiny mouth, now barely visible beneath the terrified yellow eyes. “No, honey!” I cried, pulling her away as Annie’s claws sprang into defense.

No matter how many times we had softly patted the cat and spoke or signed “gentle, gentle,” clearly, neither our limited verbal communication skills nor our sign language were successfully getting the species lesson across. Then it dawned on me. Christina’s world had been limited to living only with the other children and caretakers within the walls of her Russian orphanage. We were focused on cats and dogs. She didn’t understand the simple concept of animal.

#### Re-Examining Community

How often do we try to communicate risk and loss prevention messages to an audience that doesn’t understand our frame of reference? How often do we assume a shared perception of life, a shared world view, or the same religious context when we talk about why a river floods, the earth shakes, houses fall down, or people die from natural, technological, and human-caused disasters? The perceptions of risk of a 20-year-old atheist Angelo shopkeeper are most likely quite different from those of a 30-year-old devout Catholic Latino social worker, a 40-year-old Indian Hindu computer programmer, a 50-year-old Chinese Buddhist homeowner, or a 60-year-old Muslim grandfather, recently relocated from Lebanon to live with his beloved family. Each of these individuals holds

equally important perspectives about culture, community, family, spiritual realities, life, and openness to lifestyle or environmental change, and yet all of them together can comprise what disaster management professionals often simply refer to as an urban “community.”

In order to effectively communicate the disaster risk prior to an event, or help in recovery afterwards, the characteristics and specific needs of the world’s richly diverse local populations—the communities within a community—need to be thoroughly addressed. 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, which leads to actions not being taken, losses incurring, and recovery being less effective or timely than it could have been.

#### Turning Data into Intelligence

Fighting fierce competition presented by other message campaigns and by life in general is difficult. This challenge is particularly formidable if the desire is to create a sustained communication campaign, not just a one-shot message. Researchers and practitioners alike often correctly identify risk reduction problems. Unfortunately, the messages addressing these issues are created and expressed in their most raw, fundamental form, and often reflect 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. When data are transferred without being made into usable intelligence, the message is inevitably lost. The

missing step is the act of incorporating the psychology and conditions of the target community and the uniqueness of their complex decision-making process into message creation. When we as practitioners and/or researchers ignore the ever-shifting social landscape, most risk communication efforts are unsuccessful, or at best, unsustainable.

This common disconnect takes place in the most advanced American communities as well those around the world. These socio-cultural challenges are particularly difficult in areas such as Southeast Asia, the most disaster prone region of the world. Unlike South or Central America, Southeast Asia does not share a single landmass, language, or culture. Differences in such things as core religious philosophies and cultural traditions impact the ability to create and share a common risk framework. The ability to efficiently expedite important new risk reduction assessments, technologies, and analytical applications is hampered by these differences, which also stand in the way of moving data application into community implementation.

Information, particularly if somewhat boring and ho-hum (which science and mitigation can sometimes be as compared to many “sexier” media-intensive issues), needs to be placed into a context that makes sense to the recipient. The social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of our individual audiences needs to be the basic platform from which we skillfully craft relevant campaign strategies and messages.

By including the softer sciences in risk communications, ones that address the theoretical underpinnings of cross cultural communications, honor multiple world views, and examine reasons for social vulnerability, a more effective, holistic approach can be taken to reach those most at risk.

### Crafting New Approaches

Three particularly memorable experiences during my nine years as a Public Information Officer/Mitigation Education Outreach Coordinator for FEMA confirm the need for such crafted approaches: first, working in the Federated States of Micronesia in the Western Pacific Ocean where traditional U.S. mainland outreach approaches and distribution networks weren’t practical; sec-

ond, working with the Navajo where symbols were most readily accepted by the elders; and third, in the Northridge Earthquake recovery, where we engaged with many diverse communities within the Los Angeles area “community.” In each of these field experiences, we took risks, stumbled a bit, and eventually embraced the uniqueness of local populations through cultural attentiveness, research, and non-traditional approaches.

The identifiable roles in disaster information and risk communications are often closely linked (e.g., risk communications, community outreach, education, training, public awareness, and public information). While each term has different meanings and interpretations, all of them share a common goal of informing a target audience. Perhaps there is wisdom to be shared among these roles and from those of other industries as well.

In my recent work with emergency management initiatives in Asia, I have embraced an approach well utilized in health care and advertising—social marketing. Consider an applicable definition of social marketing for our industry: the process through which we market the risk communications message to our target audience by learning their cultural identifiers and crafting a customized outreach approach and message to address their uniqueness. As in traditional social marketing, by doing our homework, being other-oriented, addressing cultural indicators in the assessment stage, and risking non-traditional approaches, we can establish a communications framework that leads to creative, more personalized, and successful outreach opportunities.

Hopefully, we can all learn from our experiences. My most insightful one was right at home. Now, over a year later, Christina’s favorite toys have turned out to be her stuffed animals, several large and small bears, two dogs, a unicorn, and a Ms. Kitty (sadly, the real kitty died), and her mommy, a more enlightened, if not a bit more tired, cross-cultural communicator.

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Suzanne is currently working on a new book, *Disaster Sunrise: A Memoir of Family and Place*.

