

# **CRISIS + EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION**

**BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.**

## **CERC: Spokesperson**



**U.S. Department of  
Health and Human Services**  
Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention

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# CERC: Spokesperson

**This chapter will promote understanding in the following areas:**

- The role of the spokesperson in crisis communication
- What makes a good spokesperson?
- Working with the media
- Spokespersons in public meetings
- Assessing spokesperson skills

## **Giving Your Organization a Human Form**

The most important role in responding to a crisis is the formal, designated spokesperson. The spokesperson brings the organization to life. He or she embodies the organization and personifies the response. A spokesperson takes the organization from an “it” to a “we” and is a critical human connection to the various audiences.

In an ideal world, every organization would have a caring and articulate spokesperson who exhibits charisma and confidence. In many cases, there is little choice about who ultimately speaks for the organization during a crisis. One thing communication staff can control is to insist spokespersons are trained. Few people are born crisis spokespersons. In a crisis, even the most skilled communicator can make mistakes. No person should represent the entire organization in these situations unless he or she has invested time and energy in developing the appropriate skills.

What’s important is not how a person looks on television but the ability to effectively connect with the audience, either through the use of the media or in person.

Spokespersons allow the public to put a face to the act of responding to, investigating, and resolving a crisis. How a spokesperson handles public and media inquiries, in addition to what he or she says, helps establish credibility for an organization. It also contributes to the public’s transition from the crisis stage to resolution and recovery stages. An organization should carefully choose spokespersons. The selection should be based on the individual’s familiarity with the subject matter and his or her ability to talk about it in a way that is understandable and conveys confidence.<sup>1</sup>



## Choosing the Right Spokesperson is Important

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- The individual's familiarity with the subject matter
- His or her ability to talk about it clearly and with confidence

### Consider two similar cases with different outcomes:

- **Case 1:** In this situation, the CEO of a corporation accused of polluting groundwater called a news conference where he expressed anger at being unfairly accused. In this news conference he acted condescending toward his critics. A member of the audience presented him with a glass of water from her well and asked him to drink it. He did and in the process choked. Had this incident happened recently, it would likely have been recorded and loaded on YouTube.
- **Case 2:** This is a situation in which children are among the victims diagnosed with cancer in a town where the people believe the activities of a major corporation are linked to the town's prevalence of cancer. At one point during the meeting, in front of national media, a 9-year-old child with a jar of dirty water demands assurance that the water she is drinking is safe. The CDC spokesperson who was present for the meeting was both knowledgeable about the issue and trained to talk about it in an effective and consistent manner. As a result, the spokesperson responded to this line of questioning effectively, without anger, and was able to defuse a potentially difficult situation.

The right selection and training of a spokesperson can lead to better outcomes. If possible, have the crisis spokesperson appear in public often to help establish familiarity and credibility for your organization. He or she should not be a new face. For example, throughout the duration of the Brentwood postal facility anthrax case, an Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) officer met with the Brentwood workers several times to discuss antibiotic prophylaxis. When the CDC recommended 30 days of therapy in addition to the anthrax vaccine, an activist in the crowd started shouting inflammatory comments. But because the EIS officer had established himself as a credible and trusted source of information, instead of rallying around the activist, the crowd told the heckler to be quiet so they could hear what the EIS officer had to say.



## The Role of the Spokesperson in Crisis Communication

The spokesperson during an emergency should communicate information the public wants or needs. This information should empower people, build trust, and reduce the level of harm. This includes short-term and long-term psychological and physical harm. The spokesperson should seek to accomplish several goals and be prepared to respond to a variety of questions, such as the following:

- What is the incident and how severe is its magnitude (e.g., who, what, where, when, why, and how)?
- What are the health and safety risks for individuals and communities?
- Who is managing the event and what are they doing to respond to the incident?

The spokesperson can orient the larger audience at the beginning of a response by following these suggestions:

- Establish an appropriate level of concern and empathy, which can help create rapport with the audience.
- Remain calm while acknowledging uncertainty and avoiding the tendency to over-reassure.
- Show competence and consistency in responding to help build confidence and trust.
- Demonstrate openness and transparency. Panic is less common than most people imagine and doesn't come from bad news, but from mixed messages or a feeling that people aren't being told the truth.

As the event unfolds, the spokesperson may also need to address more controversial issues, including the following:

- The potential allocation of scarce public health and safety resources that are seen as unfair or wasteful
- People or communities choosing to ignore or circumvent public health and safety recommendations
- Questions and criticism about blame, responsibility, and whether the response is adequate

Remember your spokespersons are not solely responsible for messages. However, they must be involved in the development of those messages to ensure some ownership. The words and the person must match. Spokespersons don't just read a statement; they are the statement. If spokespersons don't fully understand the purpose behind the messages or recommendations, they will have

*"We, in a free democracy, owe the public open and factual communications whether it's a good story or a bad story. We are a great, resilient nation, and we've proved that. So we can take bad news as well as good news. What we can't take is a block-out of no news."*

*Col. Terry Ebbert, USMC Retired,  
Former Director,  
Homeland Security,  
City of New Orleans*

*Spokespersons don't just read a statement; they are the statement.*



difficulty assuming a stance of confidence and conveying believability and trust.

Others can and should help with the spokesperson role. While the primary spokesperson is the central figure in offering the message, he or she may be joined by other experts or agency heads. The spokesperson may turn to these supporters for answers to specific questions or to provide additional background.

Message development is covered extensively in Chapter 3; however, it's worth briefly repeating some of the CERC principles during a crisis. The following rules help to build confidence and trust. During an emergency, communication to the public is not business as usual. Before you can communicate the facts and recommendations for action, you must lessen the audience's psychological barriers by openly acknowledging their concerns.

Basic CERC rules include the following:

- **Don't over-reassure:** The objective is not to placate but to elicit accurate, calm concern. Consider statements such as: "This is a very dangerous winter storm, but people can take actions to limit their risk. If at all possible, stay at home and off the streets until the storm passes and roads are clear."
- **Acknowledge uncertainty:** Offer only what you know: "The situation is developing and we don't yet have all the facts. Based on what we do know, we expect...."
- **Emphasize that a process is in place to learn more:** Describe that process in simple terms: "Samples are taken from each person reporting flu-like symptoms. These samples are being tested now to identify the exact strain."
- **Give anticipatory guidance:** If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect. For example, to foreshadow side effects of antibiotics, you could say, "This broad spectrum antibiotic is an effective medication, but it can cause stomach upset, including nausea and diarrhea in some people."
- **Be regretful, not defensive:** Say, "We wish that more doses of vaccine were currently available" or "We feel terrible that..." when acknowledging mistakes or failures from the organization.
- **Acknowledge people's fears:** Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They are afraid, and they have a right to their fears. Use statements like, "We understand people are concerned and afraid, and it is normal to be frightened when facing a wildfire."
- **Acknowledge the shared misery:** Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event, and then help move people toward the future through positive actions. Use statements like: "Right now, with so many people in shelters, it's hard to see how things can return to normal. We are working hard to start the process of returning people to their homes."
- **Express wishes:** Say, "I wish we knew more" or "I wish our answers were more definitive."



- **Be willing to address the “what if” questions:** These are the questions that everyone is thinking about, and to which they want expert answers. Although it’s often impractical to fuel “what ifs” when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect large numbers of people, it is reasonable to answer “what ifs” if the “what ifs” could happen and people need to be emotionally prepared for them. Use statements like, “We have considered the possibility that the situation will get worse and we have identified additional locations for shelters.”
- **Give people things to do:** In an emergency, some actions are directed at victims, those exposed, or those who have the potential to be exposed. Simple actions in an emergency will give people a sense of control and will help motivate them to stay tuned to what is happening. It may also be helpful to give people a choice of actions matched to their level of concern. Give a range of responses: a minimum response, a maximum response, and a recommended middle response. Use statements like, “You may wish to cook spinach thoroughly before eating it. You may wish to avoid eating spinach. Or, you may wish to eat only prepackaged frozen spinach.”
- **Ask more of people:** Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to manage the risk and work toward solutions with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk’s severity and complexity, and recognize people’s fears, you can then ask the best of them. A spokesperson, especially one who is on the ground and at personal risk, can model the appropriate behavior—not false happiness, but true willingness to go on with life as much as possible and to make reasonable choices. Your determination to face risk will help others looking for role models.

In general, research demonstrates that people respond to crises in cooperative and problem-solving ways.<sup>2</sup> Most often, they help their neighbors and take reasonable actions. Sparking those inherent attributes will help people cope with uncertainty, fear, and misery. Use statements like, “We are all shocked and concerned about this tragedy. We need to stay strong, with hope for the future, as we do our best to help each other. By staying informed and following instructions from health officials, you can protect yourself, your family, and the community against this public health threat.”

## What Makes a Good Spokesperson?

It’s difficult to capture all qualities of a good spokesperson and pass them on to others. But it’s not difficult to identify the qualities of a poor spokesperson.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all speaker training starts or ends with: “Be yourself. Be natural.” The audience can tell when the person appears stilted or fake. Being “natural” doesn’t mean forgetting the seriousness of your role. Better advice is: “Be your organization. Act like your organization.” Every organization has an identity. A spokesperson should try to embody that identity. For example, CDC exists to make people safer and healthier. Conveying that message is important.



While there are differing opinions on what makes a good crisis spokesperson, most experts agree on these basic principles:<sup>4,5</sup>

- Have a crisis communication spokesperson(s) identified and a plan in place before the crisis.
- Make sure the spokesperson is visible, via the media, as soon as the crisis occurs. Have that spokesperson explain who is in charge, and that the person in charge is concerned about the victims. It is important to demonstrate compassion and empathy from the beginning.
- Be transparent. Provide candid, accurate information, including being open to what is known and what is unknown about the crisis.
- Don't speculate, assume, or make premature promises that may have to be reversed later.
- Meet the needs of the media, including being accessible and providing regular updates about the crisis.
- Present a unified message, whether it is among spokespersons of one organization or across several organizations that are coordinating a crisis response.

The spokesperson should communicate facts and information about the crisis, including what is being done. It is also important to communicate caring, compassion, and empathy to create public goodwill and maintain a positive reputation for your organization.

A spokesperson must be perceived as trustworthy and credible.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that there are five basic elements to establishing trust and credibility through communication.<sup>7,8</sup> All messages, written or spoken, can incorporate these elements, especially when attempting to communicate during an emergency:

- **Empathy and caring:** Share your care and concern for what others are going through in a crisis. This will increase the likelihood that the audience will listen to and act upon your message.
- **Competence and expertise:** Education, position, and title help establish competence and expertise; additionally, previous experience in dealing with similar situations will enhance the perception of competence.
- **Honesty and openness:** Give people enough information and choices to make appropriate decisions so they feel empowered in the emergency. If you do not know the information, then tell the audience why and explain that you are notifying partners, verifying information, and taking similar actions that will help you acquire more information.
- **Commitment and dedication:** State the organization's goal for the crisis response. Show dedication by

*"The minute I put my foot on the ground in New Orleans was to make it known to everybody in the community down there that I was there, there was a federal leader that had moved forward, there was a face of the response on scene, and that I was accountable."*

*RADM Thad Allen, Retired,  
Former Commandant,  
United States Coast Guard*



communicating regular follow-ups that report on the progress, including successes and challenges of the recovery process. However, don't promise what can't be delivered. Explain the limitations of the situation and express that everything is being done to keep the response on track.

- **Accountability:** Keeping promises and being accountable for the decisions made are vital for maintaining public trust and credibility in the organization throughout the response and recovery process.

A spokesperson should work very closely with the public information officer (PIO) to develop messages, gather facts, and determine what information can be released at any given time. Identify a time when your spokesperson will be available to meet with the media or the public. Determine what mechanism, such as a press briefing, media interview, or interactive webcast, he or she will use. The media and the public will feel reassured when they know when they will receive more information. This includes following up on issues.

Spokespersons must know the organization's policies about the clearance process and release of information. They must do the following:

- Understand the scope of responsibilities.
- Limit comments to only the emergency response event.
- Avoid answering questions that are outside the organization's responsibility for the response.

Spokespersons are often involved in give and take with members of the public or the media. They may be challenged and asked for specific information. The question may be about controversial issues or they may be asked for information that cannot yet be released. Even in these situations, it is important to avoid spin. Tell the truth and be open. Explain why the question cannot be answered.

The effectiveness of a spokesperson's communication is enhanced with the use of visual aids, illustrations, examples, stories, and analogies. Ensure that they help make the point and do not minimize or exaggerate the message. Visual aids, such as charts, maps, and models, can be helpful in communicating some kinds of information. They are particularly useful in describing a process or showing the relationship between factors.

A spokesperson's presentation should be reviewed and rehearsed. Review visual aids before using them publicly. Practice telling stories and examples on others within the organization before telling them publicly. It is particularly important to carefully rehearse and review responses to anticipated questions along with possible follow-up questions.



## Spokesperson Pitfalls (and How to Avoid Them) During an Emergency

- **Limit jargon and acronyms:** Jargon impedes communication and may imply arrogance. Acronyms are particularly common with government agencies, but their use may alienate lay audiences. Jargon and acronyms are often used to signal that people have inside knowledge or are members of a technical group. As such, they can interfere with efforts to build audience rapport. If using a technical term or acronym is necessary, define it.
- **Tailor messages to an easy level of comprehension:** Use simple short sentences and avoid technical vocabulary.
- **Use humor with caution:** Humor is a minefield during a crisis. Soft, self-deprecating humor may be disarming for a hostile audience, but, in general, efforts to be funny during a crisis are likely to be misinterpreted.
- **Refute negative allegations without repeating them:** Repeating any message enhances its impact. If your speaker repeats a negative accusation, it is then part of the formal message. Use positive or neutral terms.
- **Gather feedback:** Don't assume that the point is understood; rather, ask whether the message has been clear and is understood. Getting feedback, and listening to it, is important in helping to ensure effective communication.
- **Avoid one-liners, clichés, and off-the-cuff comments:** Any statement that trivializes the experience by saying something like, "There are no guarantees in life," reduces your credibility and rapport.

In general, comments should be limited to what is known. Keep personal opinions to a minimum. Spokesperson messages can be tailored to the situation and the stage of the crisis. For example, money will become an issue at some point, but during the early stage of an emergency, messages about money should be avoided.

## Working with the Media

During a crisis the media can consume your time, but they are necessary. They are the best mechanism for reaching your audience. The media are especially important during the first hours or days of an emergency. Social media,<sup>9</sup> such as Twitter and Facebook, are increasingly important, and a very fast form of communication. However, the mainstream media, particularly television and radio, still have the widest distribution.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, traditional media will be the best way to reach many parts of the public during an emergency. Media professionals generally accept their community and professional responsibilities, particularly during a crisis. However, the job of a journalist is not the same as a PIO. The differences must be respected.



## General Media Interview Goals

- Have a clear purpose for your interview. Identify core messages to deliver during the interview. Seek opportunities to repeat or restate the core message. If key messages have not been developed, then it may not be the right time for an interview.
- Make sure the reporter gets the correct name of the person being interviewed. Titles should be kept as short as possible. Use titles that describe the job rather than titles that reflect the title of an official position. For example, saying “medical epidemiologist” is better than saying “acting chief of the ‘so and so’ section of the ‘such and such’ branch.”
- Come to the interview with supporting papers that can be given to a reporter after the interview. This is a resource that can be used as a way of confirming information and helps the reporter with your facts.

## General Media Interview Pitfalls

- Don’t let reporters put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotional words. Avoid repeating them with the journalist; use your own words.
- If the question contains leading or loaded language, reframe the question to eliminate the language and then answer. Sometimes it’s helpful to restate the question in neutral terms.
- If the reporter claims someone has lodged an allegation, don’t assume he or she is correct. Don’t react to new information a reporter presents. Instead, you can say, “I have not heard that” or “I would have to verify that before I can respond.”
- If a reporter holds a microphone in front of you after you’ve answered the question, resist the temptation to add information. Do not answer the question again or add to your answer. Instead say, “That was my answer. Do you have another question for me to address?” Say it matter-of-factly, without sarcasm or annoyance.
- Understand there is no such thing as “off the record.” Background and deep background do not mean you or your spokesperson won’t be quoted or identified. Do not say anything before, during, or at the conclusion of an interview that you are not prepared to see in print the next day or uploaded to social media in the next hour. The interview is not over until the reporter and all equipment have left.
- Anticipate questions. Work with PIOs to come up with expected questions and draft answers. Nuances count. A word change here or there may make the difference in how well an answer is received. Put the answer on paper because it will usually be too long to give in public, and then find the bottom line. What is the key point? What rings true and doesn’t sound evasive? Make that core message the 30-second answer.

*“First of all, only do what you are comfortable doing, talk about what your subject matter expertise is. Don’t stretch. Don’t think or provide an opinion on things you don’t know about.”*

*RADM Thad Allen, Retired,  
Former Commandant,  
United States Coast Guard*



- Make the key point first and have prepared supporting message points. Try to say the key point in 30 seconds and in fewer than 90 words.
- Don't pretend to have answers. If the specific piece of information is not yet available, say so. "I don't know" or "That's not my area of expertise" is an appropriate answer, if followed by a commitment to find the answer.
- Don't fight your battles through the media. When talking with the media don't assign blame. Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even in jest. Avoid critiques of other agencies or other responses. Reporters can be reminded that professionals differ in their opinions, but then get back on topic. Comments should be focused on what you know and what your organization is doing.
- Avoid being caught in hypothetical questions. Reframe the question in a way that addresses legitimate concerns of the public without being sensational or offering speculation for entertainment.
- Record sensitive interviews on audio or video. Be sure the reporter knows the interview is being recorded and make a copy available. Consider posting interviews or press statements on your website.
- Do not ask reporters to agree to let you review their articles or interviews. Instead, offer to clarify information for them as they prepare their story. If a reporter shows you the piece, understand that he or she expects you to correct errors in fact, not viewpoints that may differ from yours.
- Break down multiple-part questions and answer each part separately.
- Don't raise issues you do not want to see on the Web, in print, or on the news.
- Don't respond with "no comment" to a reporter's question. Instead, state why you can't answer that question. Say that the matter is under investigation, the organization has not yet made a decision, or simply that you may not be the appropriate person to answer that question.

## Media Briefing or Press Conference Tips

- Determine in advance who will answer questions about specific topics. Consider having various experts available during the briefing as part of the team.
- Keep answers short, focused, and organized. They should be no longer than 2 minutes.
- Realize that some press briefings may be conducted via a podcast or interactive webcast. Practice one briefing using these technologies so you are comfortable with how they function.
- Assume every microphone is live—all the time—including wireless clip-on microphones. Assume that cell phone cameras and recorders are continuously capturing what you are saying and doing for sites such as YouTube.



## **In-Person Interview Tips**

- Know who will be conducting the interview. Learn which reporters will be there and the news outlets they represent.
- Know the subjects the reporter wants to cover and limit the interview to those subjects. If the reporter goes off in another direction, indicate that you are not the right person to answer that question at this time.
- Know the format and duration of the interview. Be willing to set limits so there is a clear end time. Keep the interview short in duration and focus on what is important. Consider scheduling a follow-up interview, if required.
- Ask who else will be interviewed or has been interviewed about the subject.
- Ask when the interview will be available and where. If that is not yet known, ask to be notified when the decision has been made.

## **Do not do the following:**

- Try to embarrass or argue with a reporter.
- Tell the news organization which reporter is preferred.
- Demand that remarks not be edited.
- Insist that an adversary or critic not be interviewed.
- Distort, color, or spin the truth.
- Demand that an answer or quote not be used.
- State that what you are about to say is off the record or not attributable to you.

## **Telephone Interview Tips**

- Ask the name and affiliation of the person with whom you are talking.
- Ask if the interview is being recorded.
- Ask when and where the information will be used.
- Obtain the reporter's phone number and e-mail before the interview begins. You may wish to ask to call the reporter back to verify that they are indeed who they claim. You may also need to call back if the call is interrupted or if you need to provide updated information.
- Spell out difficult names, technical terms, and phrases.



By participating in a telephone interview, while limiting its length, you have met your obligation to answer important questions. Bear the following in mind:

- Don't do the reporter's homework. You do not have an obligation to explore every facet of the incident.
- Recommend reporters review Web-based or print materials to save time.
- Schedule the interview in a quiet room.
- Don't allow distractions such as cell phones. Ask that they be turned off.
- Consider standing up; it strengthens your voice and makes you sound more alert.
- Keep written versions of key messages at hand. Repeat those often so reporters know they are the most relevant points.
- Ask reporters for feedback to ensure they understand your key points.

## Special Considerations for Television and Radio Interviews

Radio, television, and Web-based media are much more immediate and thus are more prominent in the early stages of a crisis. Television reporters may be more likely to try to elicit dramatic or sensational responses. Because these interviews are usually recorded, they may end up being aired repeatedly. Most television news outlets post entire unedited interviews on their websites.

Radio interviews, either recorded onsite or over telephone, are immediate and may be aired quickly. They, too, may appear later on a website. Interview styles should be adjusted accordingly. Review the following list for tips:

- Take the time to prepare for a television interview:
  - Rather than memorizing answers, which tends to come off as rote, the spokesperson should thoroughly learn the ideas, facts, and anecdotes that apply to the interview topic. These can be discussed easily and naturally during the interview.
  - As with all interviews, the PIO should help the spokesperson practice answering questions, especially aggressive, rapid-fire questions. Practice reduces anxiety and will result in a more relaxed and natural delivery.
  - Practice answering questions in 10- to 20-second phrases. If a question calls for a longer answer, pause every 20 seconds. This will make it easier for the host to break in for a commercial interruption or to edit materials.
  - Rehearse stopping after you are directed to stop; hard breaks in midsentence for a commercial look unprofessional and desperate.



- Slow down. Microphones and nerves tend to make people talk faster. Slow down and deliberately pause between sentences to force a more relaxed and conversational pace.
- Avoid monotone. Practice raising and lowering the pitch of your voice. Change the inflection and add emphasis through vocal variety. The vocal volume should be kept conversational. Natural animation, gestures, and facial expressions help increase credibility.

## Handling Techniques Sometimes used by Television and Radio Interviewers

Most journalists are professional and respectful of the interview process. Sometimes a novice reporter or someone seeking more controversy will use techniques designed to throw the interviewee off message.<sup>10,11</sup> It's important to be prepared for these techniques. Sensational or unrelated questions may be inserted into interviews. In these cases, do the following:

- Answer the question in as few words as possible. Don't repeat the sensational elements.
- Return to the key messages. Recommended verbal bridges back to the key message may include the following:
  - "What I think you are really asking is ..."
  - "The overall issue is ..."
  - "What's important to remember is..."
  - "It's our policy not to discuss this issue, but what I can tell you is ..."
  - "What I'm really here to discuss ..."
  - "Your readers/viewers really need to know ..."
- Character attacks may be part of interviews. Don't argue or confront an adversary during an interview. Question the science, facts, or issues, but not someone's character. For example, use a phrase like, "I can't speak for Dr. X. You'll have to ask her, but what I can address is..."
- Machine-gun questioning is a technique where a reporter fires rapid questions. Pacing is quick and the reporter interrupts your response. The most appropriate response is to use a phrase like the following:
  - "Please let me answer this question"
  - "I would like to answer those questions one at a time."

Control the pace. Take the time necessary to think before responding.



- Watch for microphone feeding and pausing. This technique is used to generate a longer response. Perhaps you've given a complete answer on a controversial issue; then the reporter pauses and cameras continue to roll. Reporters are hoping to get a longer response. If this happens, do the following:
  - Stay on your agenda.
  - Be aware of nonverbal cues like a deer-in-the-headlights look or fidgeting.
  - Relax and let the reporter fill dead air time. Dead air doesn't make exciting viewing unless you react with an action or expression. Dead air time will be edited out.
- Remember that your microphone is always on—always—including during testing and sound checks, and after the interview is officially over.
- Be aware of sensational questions with an A or B dilemma. Use positive words to reject the dilemma and correct the inaccuracies without repeating the negative. Reject both A and B if neither is valid. Explain, "There's actually another alternative you may not have considered" and give your message point.
- Surprise props may be introduced. The reporter may attempt to hand the interviewee a report or supposedly contaminated item. Don't take it. If you take it, you own it. React by saying, "I'm familiar with that report, and what I can say is..." or "Obviously, I haven't had time to review this report, but what is important is..." and then go to your key message.

## Radio Interviews

Radio is an important crisis communication medium because it is immediate and portable. Reporters often use small handheld recorders and wireless technology to file their stories. In other cases, radio interviews are done over the telephone.

Live is different from prerecorded. Find out if the interview is live, live to tape, or taped. If the interview is live, determine whether callers will be permitted to ask questions. It is challenging to provide useful answers to questions from individual citizens during a crisis interview. That is usually not an effective means to provide information.

Radio interviews include unique features. The following list provides important radio tips:

- Speak in normal tones with a conversational style of speaking.
- Avoid using vocalized pauses such as "uh," "um," and "you know." Do not feel a responsibility to fill air time. Take the time necessary to form your thoughts before answering questions.
- Use notes but be aware of the rustle of papers.
- Know that radio interviews will probably not be as in-depth as print interviews. Keep key messages succinct.



- Avoid lengthy scientific explanations. As with television, the radio audience has limited scientific background. Take on your audience's point of view and speak to their level of understanding.
- Be aware that reporters may ask the same question multiple times in an attempt to elicit a different answer or to get an answer that is more concise. Avoid beginning an answer with a phrase like "As I said before..." because the actual audience for this interview will not have heard your previous answer of the same question.
- Understand that radio is more informal and spontaneous than television. Radio is more community-based and reporters are likely to ask more questions from the community's perspective.

## Television Interviews

Television is a visual medium; consider your physical presentation.<sup>12</sup> This includes dress, gestures, and facial expressions. While some people are more natural and comfortable on television, preparation can help improve effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

- Avoid broad unnatural gestures or moving around in the chair. Ask for a chair that does not swivel.
- Don't look at yourself on the TV monitor. It is distracting to the viewer.
- Look at the reporter, not the camera, unless directed otherwise.
- When wearing an earphone, ensure that it fits securely and that you know what to do if it pops out of your ear. Ask the producer or sound technician for help if needed.
- Sit comfortably upright with a straight posture.
- In taped interviews, ask to repeat your response if you believe the first attempt was not the best. In live interviews, correct misstatements as quickly as possible.

## What to Wear on Television

Clothing selection is an important consideration, particularly in televised situations, and should be appropriate to the specific situation. For example, if you're in a field situation, a suit may not be appropriate. Do not wear medical clothes or a lab coat unless you would be logically wearing them for your job. Jackets with the agency name or logo may be appropriate.

- **For men, consider the following appearance tips:**
  - Avoid patterned suits and neckties, stripes, and checks. The camera will make them wavy and distracting to the viewer. Neckties should be somber and professional. Avoid novelty ties.
  - Button suit coats. If possible, sit on your coattails to avoid bunching around your neck and shoulders. Light blue or gray suits are most camera-friendly. In an emergency, it is most appropriate to look conservative, not stylish or flashy.



- Wear white shirts to be the most conservative.
- Wear socks that are darker than the suit. They should be knee-length. Because your pant legs may creep up, wear long socks to prevent your ankles from showing.
- Make sure your hair is neatly trimmed and groomed to convey professionalism. When possible, be clean-shaven.

■ **For women, consider the following appearance tips:**

- Wear tailored, professional clothes to convey credibility.
- Plan neutral colors and muted patterns for a camera-friendly look. Most set backdrops are blue or purple. Take along a contrasting shawl or scarf to ensure that you do not blend into the background if your suit matches the set color.
- Wear dark shoes.
- Do not wear distracting or shiny jewelry or accessories that jangle or need adjusting.
- Wear daytime, conservative makeup. Avoid bright fingernail polish.

■ **For men and women, consider the following appearance tips:**

- Ask for powder if your skin is shiny under the lights. Bald men should powder the tops of their heads.
- Take off glasses if you can do so without squinting. If you must wear them, consider getting antiglare glasses. Avoid tinted lenses or sunglasses during a television interview. If the light hurts your eyes, ask that it be adjusted. Eye contact is important in establishing credibility.

## Spokespersons in Public Meetings

You or your spokespersons may have to speak at public meetings. This may include a variety of audiences, such as community members, people who are affected by the crisis, elected officials, first responders, and members of the media. Public meetings may be accompanied by especially high levels of emotion and create unique demands.

### When Emotions and Accusations Run High During an Emergency Public Meeting

Crises often create heightened emotional responses. The following basic circumstances are more likely to increase angry responses:

- When people have been hurt
- When they feel threatened by risks not of their own making
- When they feel their fundamental beliefs are being challenged



- When people feel weak in the face of others who are more powerful
- When they feel like they haven't been treated fairly or with respect
- When people feel manipulated, ignored, or trivialized

If conducted in an insensitive manner, public meetings may increase dissention and outrage.<sup>4</sup> The following approaches may help you or your spokesperson soothe these emotions and help the community work toward a mutually agreeable solution:

- **Don't lose your temper:** Public health and safety personnel see themselves as the good guys. It hurts when intentions, abilities, and expertise are criticized. Consider the following points to keep operations calm and focused:
  - Set aside your own anger or defensiveness.
  - Strive to understand. Often the anger being expressed by others is a result of an overwhelming sense of helplessness.
  - Show empathy.
  - In cases where extreme emotion might be expected, ask for ground rules outlined by a neutral third party.
  - Acknowledge the anger up front. Explain what might be accomplished in the public meeting. If communication deteriorates, it may help to refer back to your meeting objectives.
- **Practice self-management to calm nerves in high-stress situations:** It can help to take deep breaths and give yourself mental reminders that criticism is not personal and that there is a greater purpose to the meeting. Consider the following tips to keep the meeting calm:
  - Anticipate criticism and attacks, and practice responding calmly.
  - Let the other person vent, without interruption, for a reasonable amount of time. This may help dissipate anger.
  - Pause before responding and acknowledge the emotion.
- **Let people talk:** The more people talk, the better the chance that they'll judge the meeting as successful:
  - Don't allow lectures by the spokesperson or the organizational experts.
  - Suggest ground rules to ensure order and allow those with opposing viewpoints an opportunity to be heard.
  - Offer equal time to dissenting views among those attending. This will help avoid a spiral of silence.



- **Engage in active listening:** Concentrate on what the person is saying, and listen for both feelings and content:
  - Resist forming an answer while listening to the response; it interferes with your understanding of what the other person is saying.
  - Let your audience know all concerns are being taken seriously and take time to frame your responses.
  - Avoid interrupting, but set limits. If a hostile speaker dominates, appeal to him or her. Explain that it is important to address the concerns of others in the room.
- **Ask questions:** Wait for their questions before you offer your solutions. You may be surprised to find out that the issues that matter to your audience are not the issues you expected. The key is not to offer solutions to problems, but to help the audience discover solutions.
- **Don't say "but." Instead, say "yes, and:"** Typically, people express their differences by prefacing their responses with "but." Listeners will be more receptive if you first acknowledge their views with a "yes" and then preface your view with an "and." Example: "Yes, we want to protect people's rights and we want to keep them alive to enjoy those rights."
- **Avoid saying "I know exactly how you feel:"** Instead, acknowledge the feeling and its legitimacy. Use statements like the following:
  - "I understand why you are angry"
  - "I understand your frustration and anyone in this circumstance would likely feel this way."
- **Respond appropriately but professionally to personal, unfair, or abusive comments:** A certain amount of anger and negative emotion directed at you is understandable. If it becomes personal you have a right to call such behavior inappropriate and ask the person to join with you in getting back to the issues. Try to signal to the audience when the conversation is no longer appropriate.
- **Look forward, not backward. Acknowledge past mistakes:** Use statements such as "I wish we had met with you sooner to hear these concerns." Then talk about where you want to go in resolving problems rather than where you have been. Avoid rehashing old issues. Encourage people to look forward.



## Assessing Spokesperson Skills

In *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, W. Timothy Coombs describes tasks, knowledge, skills, and traits that are important for being an effective crisis spokesperson.<sup>13</sup>

Table 5–1. Spokesperson Media Task Analysis

<b>Task Statement</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>Skills</b>	<b>Traits</b>
<b>Appear pleasant on camera</b>	1. Understand the value of proper delivery	1. Strong Delivery	1. Low communication apprehension
<b>Answer questions effectively</b>	1. Understand danger of long pauses 2. Understand the steps to effective listening 3. Appreciate the danger of “no comment” statements 4. Understand the danger of arguing with reporters	1. Able to think quickly 2. Able to use the steps to effective listening 3. Able to use phrases other than “no comment” when an answer is not currently known 4. Able to stay calm under pressure	1. High stress tolerance 2. Communication competence 3. Low verbal aggressiveness
<b>Present crisis information clearly</b>	1. Appreciate the problems with jargon 2. Understand the need to structure responses	1. Able to avoid the use of jargon 2. Able to organize responses	

*continued*



**Task Statement**

**Knowledge**

**Skills**

**Traits**

**Handle difficult questions**

1. Understand the characteristics of tough questions

1. Able to identify tough questions
2. Able to ask for questions to be reworded
3. Able to preface tough questions in a tactful manner
4. Able to challenge incorrect information in a questions
5. Able to explain why a question cannot be answered
6. Able to evaluate the appropriateness of multiple-choice responses in a question
7. Able to respond to questions with multiple parts

1. Low argumentativeness

**Establishes credibility**

1. Answers questions effectively
2. Demonstrates subject matter expertise and/or disaster management expertise
3. Is honest and frank

1. Remains calm
2. Reflects the appropriate level of concern
3. Projects an atmosphere of stability

1. Communication Assertiveness

**Improves over time**

1. Understands the importance of feedback

1. Ability to receive feedback
2. Seeks out advice and constructive criticism

1. Self reflexive
2. Flexible and adaptive

\*Adapted and reprinted with permission from W. Timothy Coombs.



Task statements are items that you or your spokesperson should accomplish when speaking as a representative of the organization. While looking pleasant on camera is necessary, answering questions effectively, presenting information clearly, and handling difficult questions is what brings success. He or she must also establish rapport and credibility with the audience.

These tasks are enhanced by knowledge of the communication process and technical expertise, such as experience handling disasters or specific subject matter knowledge. Often, credibility emerges from the communication situation itself. As a spokesperson demonstrates knowledge and skill, he or she is accepted as credible by the audience.

Specific communication skills, verbal and nonverbal, are critical in being a strong spokesperson:

- Maintain eye contact and be aware of facial expressions. A frown or grimace at the wrong time can create a very negative image.
- Avoid leaning on the lectern and maintain good posture, even if exhausted.
- Spokespersons should have strong voices, articulate clearly, and be able to speak in a relaxed conversational tone, even in stressful situations.
- Express emotions, but be careful about extremes.

Finally, there are specific communication traits that characterize effective crisis spokespersons:

- They typically have low communication apprehension and do not exhibit stress or become overly nervous when speaking to audiences.
- They are able to tolerate and manage high levels of stress and uncertainty, and generally have low verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness.
- Effective spokespersons generally remain calm even in complex and chaotic situations.

The spokesperson role is critical to effective crisis communication. The most effective spokespersons are able to recognize where improvement is needed and work closely with communication staff to improve their skills. This may involve watching tapes of press conferences and participating in media training. They should be able to receive and act upon feedback and constructive criticism. Effective crisis spokespersons also realize that they are part of the communication team and rely on the team to communicate during the stress and uncertainty of a crisis.

## **Conclusion**

Organizational spokespersons have pivotal roles in crisis and emergency risk communication. They are the face of the organization and humanize the crisis message. The role of spokesperson is challenging and stressful. It requires careful preparation and sensitivity to the communication process and the needs of the audiences. Credible, empathetic, and composed spokespersons are very valuable communication resources during a crisis. A skilled spokesperson can make communicating during a crisis much more efficient and effective.



*Pocketcard 5-1. You're the Spokesperson—What You Need to Know*

**CRISIS EMERGENCY  
RISK COMMUNICATION**

**Build Trust and Credibility by Expressing:**

- Empathy and caring.
- Competence and expertise.
- Honesty and openness.
- Commitment and dedication.

**Top Tips:**

- Don't over-reassure.
- Acknowledge uncertainty.
- Express wishes ("I wish I had answers").
- Explain the process in place to find answers.
- Acknowledge people's fear.
- Give people things to do.
- Ask more of people (share risk).

**As a Spokesperson:**

- Know your organization's policies.
- Stay within the scope of responsibilities.
- Tell the truth. Be transparent.
- Embody your agency's identify.

**BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.**

**Prepare to Answer These Questions:**

- Are my family and I safe?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who is in charge here?
- What can we expect?
- Why did this happen?
- Were you forewarned?
- Why wasn't this prevented?
- What else can go wrong?
- When did you begin working on this?
- What does this information mean?

**Stay on Message:**

- "What's important is to remember..."
- "I can't answer that question, but I can tell you..."
- "Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers..."
- "Let me put that in perspective..."

**CONSISTENT MESSAGES ARE VITAL**





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