Best practices in risk communication
How to communicate sensitive information

Risk communication is emerging as an important area of expertise for companies in the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, chemical, and energy sectors as their products often pose health and environmental risks. Whether it takes the form of product brochures, news stories or paid ads, risk communication can benefit from following a number of principles.

**AVOID MIXED MESSAGES**
Differences in the interpretation of many words and phrases can hamper the communication of risk information between companies and their target audiences. Several words and concepts used frequently in risk communication — such as the word “risk” and the notion of “probability” — have different technical and colloquial meanings that may result in mixed messages and create confusion, misunderstanding, and even outrage.

To avoid mixed messages, risk researchers Cynthia Jardine and Steve Hrudey advise communicators to identify the aforementioned words and concepts in their communication and assess their potential to confuse or mislead, pay attention to vernacular discussions such as news stories for other meanings of the words they use in their own risk communication, and pre-test their risk communication on target audiences to discover unrecognised areas of misunderstanding or confusion.

**EMPHASISE THE BENEFITS**
Just because companies develop products that have associated health or environmental risks does not mean they should not emphasise product benefits in their communication. Conversely, a perception of the absence of important consumer benefits may be sufficient condition for the rejection of the product in question.

**ENGAGE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS**
 Invite stakeholders to engage in an open dialogue with the company in airing concerns, asking questions and providing feedback. This invitation should start as soon as possible, not when trouble is already brewing. Focus groups, consumer panels and Internet forums provide three opportunities for this to take place. Of course, there is a chance that such invitations might reveal risks that people had never imagined. However, they can also show the safety measures that the company has already taken in recognition of those risks.

**BUILD TRUST**
No effective risk communication can take place in the absence of trust. If the consumer perceives the communicator as untrustworthy, he or she may discount or totally disregard the message provided by the communicator. It takes a long time to build trust, but only a moment of rashness to undermine it. Trust can be established on the basis of a track record of technical competence, caring, fairness, and openness in communication. There also has to be accountability — people want to know with certainty whether an organisation has assumed responsibility for ensuring consumers’ safety. Hence, certain conditions such as regulatory safeguards and avenues of redress would have to be fulfilled by the company and communicated to its target audience.

**COMMUNICATE TO THE MEDIA WITH CARE**
Last, communicators should ensure that they provide accurate and timely information to the media. In particular, they should avoid writing and promoting news releases on scientific studies that have not been peer-reviewed.

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