

Managing Outrage and Crises: Dealing with Risk by Understanding your Audience

by Cliona Reeves

When someone mentions “risk management”, everyone thinks they understand what the term means, but are we really all speaking the same language?

“Probably not,” says Dr. Peter Sandman, independent consultant and risk communication expert based in Princeton, NJ. “The experts respond to hazard; the public responds to outrage. When hazard is high and outrage is low, the experts will be concerned and the public will be apathetic. When the hazard is low and outrage is high, the public will be concerned and the experts will be apathetic. The public’s definition of risk is as ‘objective’ as the experts’ technical definitions. It is less statistical, but it is grounded in real empirical phenomena of control and familiarity.” The problem, in short, is that each group is using the same word –risk— in completely different ways.

This insight into the different, and sometimes utterly incompatible views of risk led Dr. Sandman to develop the equation which he uses to define levels of risk from both perspectives at once.

$$\text{RISK} = \text{HAZARD} + \text{OUTRAGE}$$

Deceptively simple, this formula includes both the objective, technical, measurable component (the “hazard”) and the cultural, emotional, personal component (the “outrage” factor, including all levels of fear, anger and general upset). It is possible for the actual hazard to be low and the level outrage to be high nonetheless, and vice versa, and each situation requires a completely different approach.

“Everything hinges on how elevated the hazard and the level of outrage are,” explains Dr.

Sandman. “If the level of hazard is low and the level of outrage is also low, there’s nothing much going on. People aren’t upset, and there’s nothing for them to be upset about. This is not much of a business opportunity.”

Level of Outrage	High	Outrage Management	Crisis Communication
	Low	(no business opportunity here)	Precaution Advocacy
		Low	High
		Level of Hazard	

Precaution Advocacy

If, however, the level of hazard is high, but the level of outrage is low, you have people who aren’t upset enough about something –and they should be. Here we enter the realm of Precaution Advocacy. “The goal here, believe it or not, is actually to raise people’s level of upset and outrage,” says Dr. Sandman. “They may not be all worked up about wearing helmets when they ride their bicycles, or checking their smoke detectors twice a year, but you want them to be, because the consequences of something going wrong in either case can be severe, even life-threatening. You want to replace their apathy with well-placed concern.”

In a case of precaution advocacy, fear is your friend. “You want people afraid of how terribly injured they could be if they don’t wear their bicycle or motorcycle helmets, or use their seatbelts, or check their smoke detectors,” says Dr. Sandman. “It also helps to play up the ‘yuk’

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factor, describing in hideous details the consequences of not taking the needed action. The most important thing is to give them something to do, somewhere to discharge their new-found fear in positive, take-charge action, and to train them appropriately, so they will be capable of carrying out needed action.”

Outrage Management

If the level of hazard is low, but people are terribly upset anyway, the scene changes to one of Outrage Management, which is the reverse of Precaution Advocacy. “For example, they may be terribly angry that you’ve stopped producing a certain flavour of their favourite food product,” says Dr. Sandman. “Remember the outraged phone calls and letters when Coca-Cola changed its formula? No one is in any danger, but people are upset anyway, and you have to deal with that emotion before you can even begin to address the facts or try to find a resolution.”

That being said, one must remember that even “objective” hazards have subjective components. “Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), for example, seem to Monsanto to be low-hazard and therefore tries to do outrage management with people who are worried,” says Dr. Sandman. “Greenpeace, on the other had, believes GMOs are high-hazard, and therefore tries to do Precaution Advocacy with people who, in Greenpeace’s judgement, aren’t worried enough.

Talking to a group of outraged people begins with not talking at all. Listening and allowing people to vent their concern is a crucial first step.

“You must actively listen, though,” explains Dr. Sandman. “You can’t glaze over or look impatient. You must reflect back their concern with a genuine interest in their point of view and a wish to understand their outrage. No amount of quoting statistics about how the risk is only one in a million will persuade people afraid of contaminated water that they can safely drink up. They’ll just shout ‘Liar’ and receive thunderous applause from their friends. Extraordinary as it may seem, an outraged person would rather cling to the belief that he is in danger of dying than relinquish his outrage. The evidence you quote in an effort to calm his fears will actually increase his level of outrage, not diminish it. Nor does it help to point out that the hazard is, in your view, negligible or non-existent. They see a hazard, and until you deal with their fear and anger, they won’t hear a word you say. Outrage is not a misperception of risk, but rather a part of what we mean by risk.”

So how do you effectively communicate to an outraged group? Dr. Sandman outlines several important points:

First, be prepared for a long meeting. Trying to shorten the meeting suggests there is something to hide. Allowing the audience to determine when the meeting is over gives them a measure of control and indicates that you seriously want to address all their concerns to the fullest extent.

Second, make your long-term goal that of making the issue boring without being boring yourself. A group outraged by something is seized with indefatigable interest, so your goal is to persuade them that the subject itself is boring enough that they would rather stay home than go to another meeting on this issue. This doesn’t mean the meeting can be boring; it should be interesting and engaging, but should also aim at the long-term conclusion that the issue is being well-managed by others and doesn’t require any further attention from the audience.”

Third, never talk first. “Allow the outraged speakers as much time as they need to vent their concerns,” says Dr. Sandman. “They want to yell, and to be seen to be yelling, so listen carefully, and say little. The less you say, the more they will want to hear from you, and when they have finished venting, wait until they invite you –or possibly

order you– to reply to their concerns. Always start by reiterating their key points, such as that they are angry about X, worried about Y, and want you to take action about Z. This demonstrates that you have not only heard them, but clearly understand them. Do this tentatively, asking questions rather than making statements, to check

and see whether you’ve got it right. If they call you a jerk, control your own outrage at the insult, listen carefully, and focus on the criticisms you can agree with, rather than on rebuttals of the criticisms you think are wrong. It is not intuitive or natural to do so, but your goal is not for you to feel better at the end of the meeting, but for the outraged parties to feel better.”

When the crisis is past, Dr. Sandman highly recommends giving credit to the critics for the newly improved situation. “In 1990, for example, there were complaints about the environmental impact of the styrofoam boxes McDonald’s used for packaging their hamburgers,” he explains. “If they had abandoned the boxes on their own and painted the golden arches green, they would have been attacked. Instead, McDonald’s representatives met with the Environmental Defence Fund and invited them to

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police the switch to a more environmentally friendly packaging format, so they could certify that the change had been done right, and to blow the whistle if there were a problem. The EDF was able to claim a victory over a major multinational, and McDonald's agreed they had been forced to take this step. When a critic is busy taking credit, there's little time left over for further attack. And third parties don't doubt the accuracy of an achievement that your critics are taking credit for. If critics say they made you take a certain action, nobody questions whether you did it."

Crisis Communication

Finally, in a case where the level of hazard is high and the level of outrage is also high, the scene changes to one of people who are genuinely upset about something they have every reason to be upset about. "In a real crisis, such as 9/11, Chernobyl, Walkerton, SARS, a pandemic, a flood or a fire, or a food safety incident where people –or their pets– are becoming ill or dying, there is real danger, and people are right to be upset," says Dr. Sandman. "The goal here is to validate their feelings and to shore up their courage by saying that this is a truly terrible thing to endure, but we will all get through it together if we each do our part in making wise decisions."

The classic case Dr. Sandman cites in effective crisis communication was how Johnson & Johnson handled the incident in 1982 when cyanide was put into capsules of extra-strength Tylenol. "Even though the police reports showed that the contaminant had been introduced by someone in no way connected with J&J, they immediately took the blame, and the public immediately responded that J&J was not at fault. If they had done, Jack-in-the-Box did initially in 1993, denying any responsibility and claiming to be as much victims as the children who died after eating undercooked burgers, they would have been toast. While Jack-in-the-Box continued its scapegoat strategy, the supplier blamed itself, saying that this was the worst thing they had ever done, that their testing system was not sensitive enough to track this new, virulent strain of E. coli, that three children were now dead, and they felt awful. Jack-in-the-Box blamed the supplier; the supplier blamed the supplier; the public, in response blamed Jack-in-the-Box."

A Tailored Approach

As you see, not all risk communication is the same, and only an approach tailored to the both the level of actual, measurable hazard, and the level of deeply-felt, passionately expressed outrage has any hope of success. The Jack-in-the-

Box story demonstrates how well or badly different approaches can work. "The sweet spot, of course," adds Dr. Sandman, "is the moderate-hazard, moderate-outrage arena of Stakeholder Relations, where people are engaged and interested, neither apathetic nor upset. Here you can rationally explain your views and respond to questions and concerns. This is part of ongoing relationship building, and is important, but you'd better also know how to deal with a crisis and with outrage if you want to be effective at risk management communication." 

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For More Information

Of course, it is impossible to cram a whole career's worth of insights and analysis on this subject into one brief article. Fortunately, Dr. Sandman has written a vast array of articles, which are available on his website:

www.psandman.com

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