If risk assessors are to participate in an effective risk communication network, it is important for them to develop partnerships with those who work in the area of public policy, media, health promotion, food safety education, and marketing of food and beverages. Each of these groups needs to be able to access accurate information from risk assessors in a timely manner. As interpreters and gatekeepers, these partners can play an important link between scientists, the public and stakeholders. A collegial rather than adversarial relationship between and among these groups is essential if the public is to be well served.

It is important to understand that not everyone approaches food safety issues from the same perspective. Legislators and their staff members, for example, may lack the scientific background of a university scientist, while the university scientist may not understand the policy decision-making process. Elected officials may also be more concerned with constituent outrage while the scientist is focusing on potential hazards. These differences can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations if not accounted for before, during and after communication has taken place. Information should be based on a simple, plain language that all parties can understand.

In addition to developing linkages between those concerned with food safety and a language that all can understand, groups and organizations must realize that exaggerations can hinder the communication process, as can claims that no credible opposition exists to a certain perspective. Proponents of irradiation and biotechnology can be implicated for using both of these tactics, which has led to opposition from various sectors including some with a high level of credibility. Persistence can pay...
off, and sometimes support comes in unexpected ways. Still, little can take the place of developing collegial linkages, and it is important to be able to acknowledge unknowns.

One of the linkages within this network that is often weak is the different organizations and the media. Reporters are viewed as vultures, eager to pounce on a story and sensationalize it in order to get better ratings. They argue that they are doing a job that is defined by deadlines and that claimsmakers must articulate their messages in short, colorful terms that will gain the attention of audiences.

A recent national survey by an Iowa research organization found that topics of high interest for television audiences were, in order of importance: the environment and health, the economy and crime in the community. Since 80 percent of the people surveyed want information about food and health, as well as other environmental considerations, there is a natural market for information about food safety and risk. While audiences are interested in broad aspects of these issues, their primary interest is about how these issues “play” locally. How safe is the food on my local grocer’s shelves? How safe is the food served in the local restaurant that I frequent?

Much like legislators and other elected officials, journalists may not be well versed in the language used by university and private researchers, which can generate misunderstanding and mistrust between the media and scientists. At the same time, most journalists are not seeking to disrupt the flows of information taking place within the various areas of research, or to portray different organizations as corrupt. Businesses, governments and other groups also acknowledge, however reluctant, that they need the media. Developing proactive strategies that are based on the dissemination of risk communication can strengthen the connection.

It has been said that all politics are local. If true, then all food safety issues are local.
between the groups.

A new actor that has recently and rapidly shown up on the food safety communication scene is the Internet. This new tool poses as both a boon and a threat to risk communicators. The Internet is an excellent resource to use to disseminate information quickly; yet there are few checks on the information that is presented. For this reason, the Internet is much like other forms of communication. It can be used, abused and misused. This is another area in which risk communicators must network together to engage this tool to its true potential.

Two of the main players in the food safety arena that must work together to develop linkages with others and open the door to solicitations from other groups and organizations are the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As a nation, we are eating more seafood and raw fruits and vegetables, often produced in other countries. These trends encompass more and more actors in the production, processing, transportation and retailing of food. The FDA and USDA must be able to work with these different groups, as well as be able and willing to listen to groups involved in the surveillance of the food system. At this point, printed materials and community action kits are available in several languages, and point-of-purchase aids are available for use and distribution in supermarkets. These efforts must continue.

Finally, surveys show that consumers are reacting to their increased knowledge of risk by practicing safer food handling. People are more aware of such issues as *E. coli* and *Listeria spp.*, the importance of washing hands, and the importance of keeping warm foods warm and cold foods cold. However, knowledge and behavior are not always highly correlated, and it falls upon the risk communication network to help close these gaps.