OPEN COMMUNICATION

Risk communication is typically exercised in one of two ways:

1) alerting people about some known or unknown risk or
2) reassuring people about some known or unknown risk.

Most of the people who practice risk communication or who have responsibility for food safety education have difficulty in reassuring people about the lack of genuine risk. Theory and research demonstrate that the risks that kill people and the risks that upset people are completely different. It matters little whether the risk is mortality, morbidity, ecosystem damage or socioeconomic damage. In other words, levels of actual risk and levels of perceived risk are often uncorrelated. The key question is why is the public afraid of the wrong risks?

This combination of actual risk and perceived risk has led to a formulation of the problem in terms of risk, hazard and outrage. According to this model, risk, as perceived by the public, is the outcome of the hazard plus the outrage surrounding an issue. Those involved in risk analysis and communication often overestimate the risk when the hazard is high and the outrage is low; they underestimate the risk when the hazard is low and the outrage is high.

In contrast, the public focuses on the outrage and ignores the hazard. The public, therefore, overestimates the risk when the outrage is high and the hazard is low, and underestimates the risk when the outrage is low and the hazard is high. In terms of outcomes, when outrage is low, media coverage is typically light and policy procedures are discounted—though when outrage is high, media coverage is intense and policy procedures take center stage.

The best way to build trust is not to need it.

– Peter Sandman

Risk Communication in Food Safety...Motivating and Building Trust
This may be better explained if it is applied to a specific topic. Irradiation technology has been deemed unsafe by some groups, while others view it as a way to prolong the shelf life of some foods, as well as eliminating harmful organisms from the food supply. To this point, a majority of objective scientific research has shown that irradiation poses only a minimal hazard to the food supply, and its benefits far outweigh any possible hazards. Some groups, though, have sought to increase the outrage over irradiation, adopting slogans and perspectives that play on fears of nuclear technologies and unnatural foods. Proponents of irradiation, on the other hand, point to various scientific studies to prove the safety of irradiated products. Outrage seems to have increased on this topic and the debate, along with policy decisions, has made front-page news.

The evolution of this debate is mirrored in various other food technologies, such as food and agricultural biotechnology, and has led some groups to become very closed in their approach to risk communication. There is, however, a moral obligation to inform people about risks. It is often the case, though, that potential hazards are unknown, so risk communication is based on rather soft or even nonexistent data, opening the door for increased outrage as groups attach themselves to unsupported comments.

While managing outrage is expensive, managing hazards can be even more expensive. When outrage is not managed, the public demands that regulators and the government do something about their outrage. In most cases when the outrage is unwarranted, industry will end up paying a high cost to deal with what may have been a trivial hazard. So, the argument can be made that if you spend more money reducing outrage, you will spend less money reducing minimal hazards. The point is that while
it does take time and money to manage outrage, if done in the beginning, it leads to a better understanding of the hazards associated with the outrage. It is much more productive to invite comments and criticism early when outrage is not increasing and potential opponents can be part of the decision-making process.

**Strategies for outrage management include:**

1. Admitting the mistake.
2. Apologizing for the mistake.
3. Offering restitution.
4. Saying you will try not to do it again.
5. Offering penance.

If the hazard is bad, fix the hazard. If the outrage is bad, fix the outrage. If they are both bad, fix them both, but don’t expect that fixing the hazard will help fix the outrage any more than fixing the outrage will help fix the hazard. They are separate problems with separate strategies of mitigation, and open risk communication is a path to follow to begin the mitigation.