Revisiting the Best Practices in Risk and Crisis Communication: A Multi-case Analysis
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Purpose: This study extends the best practices in risk and crisis communication by synthesizing the contributions from research and assessing the applicability of the framework in a multi-case analysis. Specifically, we summarize the research on best practices over the last decade, focusing on Seeger’s 2006 best practices as the foundation, and analyze five environmental contamination crises through government documents, media accounts, and in-depth interviews to confirm the best practices and identify any communication challenges not encompassed by the current framework.

Context: Study was funded by a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to assess the communication responses to previous contamination events and test message strategies, based on the best practices, in a hypothetical intentional contamination event.

Best Practices in Risk and Crisis Communication: The best practices framework (Seeger, 2006) most closely follows the three-stage model of crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis) by serving as a guide to plan ahead for crisis, communicate responsibly in the acute phase of the crisis, and minimize harm in facilitating post-crisis response. Nine of the best practices fit within this pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis model; however, according to Seeger (2006), the practice of evaluating and updating crisis plans should be ongoing throughout the crisis cycle. In 2009, Sellnow and Vidoroff proposed an eleventh best practice that should also be ongoing throughout the crisis cycle: acknowledge and account for cultural differences.

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Method: We used a case study approach to analyze multiple data points
- Articles identified through Google News search for key words in each contamination case (n=80)
- Other documents including government reports, congressional testimony, agency press releases, public meeting transcripts, agency and activist websites, etc. (n=38)
- Interviews with primary spokespersons in each case when available (n=7)

Cases were first analyzed deductively to assess adherence to best practices and then inductively to identify communication challenges not covered by the best practices.

Cases:
- 1979-2008 Tar Creek Super Fund Site, Picher, OK
- 2002 Canadian Pacific Railway Derailment, Minot, ND
- 2006 Post Katrina Travel Trailers, Gulf Coast, LA & MS
- 2008 TVA Coal Ash Spill, Roane County, TN
- 2010 BP Oil Spill, Gulf of Mexico

Conclusions: We offer four additional best practices to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the public, tailor messages to affected audiences, acknowledge and account for vulnerable populations, and complete and communicate recovery efforts. We also suggest modifications to two best practices to provide instruction for self-protection and accept uncertainty and do not speculate. We propose this updated framework not as a checklist to but rather as continuous guidelines for risk and crisis planning, preparation, response, and recovery for organizations and agencies that affect the health and wellbeing of the public.
**Figure 1:** Best practices in risk and crisis communication (Seeger, 2006).

**Figure 2.** Best practices in risk and crisis communication (Sellnow & Vidoloff, 2009).

**15 Essential Guidelines for Ongoing Risk and Crisis Communication**

1. Plan ahead for a prompt response.
2. Establish a crisis communication network with credible sources.
3. Prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the public.
4. Accept uncertainty and do not speculate.
5. Listen to the public’s concerns.
7. Tailor messages to affected audiences.
8. Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness.
9. Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy.
10. Acknowledge and account for vulnerable populations.
11. Acknowledge and account for cultural differences.
12. Form partnerships with the public.
13. Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible.
14. Complete and communicate recovery efforts.
15. Continuously evaluate and update crisis plans.

*Figure 3.* 15 Essential Guidelines for Ongoing Risk and Crisis Communication (Veil, Anthony, Starcek, Young, & Sellnow, 2017)