Risk communication or disaster recovery?
A few guidelines targeting critical environments

Ivano Canteri – Managing Director
Michele Livolsi – Project Specialist
Risk and crisis: an analytic distinction
Reality mixes with perception

- The concept of risk is related with human expectations and can be described as a potential negative effect on a present condition which can be determined by a currently ongoing or a possible (future) event.

- On the one hand risk is related with human perception, on the other hand it is related with real events and situations.

- Risk can be assessed scientifically.

We have to deal with a double-sided concern:

Emergency (crisis) vs. context (risk)
Crises bring (and dictate) changes

- In Chinese the word “Crisis” is composed by two ideograms: challenge and opportunity

- Using a figurative image, being in a state of crisis is like standing on a top of a peak: to reach the plains you can both fall down one the rocky side or walk down the side of the path

- In other words, a crisis is a turning point:

  it is the time which prompts to a number of choices; their consequences will determine the outcome of the crisis itself
Defining risk communication
The communication process

- To place bits of information in an individual’s mind hoping to influence those future decisions/behaviour affecting our existence
The public perception is built on memories

- **The field of experience**: The key to the success of any kind of communication
  - It is the result of the continuous aggregation and accumulation of perceptions and beliefs about facts, reality, situations, individuals, circumstances, images, sounds, feelings, stimuli of any kind
  - It belongs to the receiver as well as the sender (!)
  - All of these build up in a complex and convoluted network of mental association

The system of perceptions guiding the individual in the choice for a product, a service or a brand
Communicating means retaining control

- Keep negative perceptions to a minimum and stress the positive values which are entailed in (or can be inferred by) the context.

- Whatever the key message this does not exist until it finds a precise place in the individual’s mind.

- The ability to master as many communication variables as possible is a fine-tuning process extended in time based on:
  - Information integration
  - Consistency and continuity of message, style and tone of communication.
If time is key invest on it

- If all of this is a time-requiring exercise during crises time is the least available resource

As a consequence, if seen isolated crisis communication is a recipe for certain failure

- If time is key let’s use it to reverse the paradygm

Assume risk communication as a broad scale action incorporating crisis communication as a special-purpose integrated tool/procedure
Risk communication as a long term process
Risk communication entail integration as key foundation

- Risk communication can be defined as the process of:
  - Informing people about the hazards of a specific location
  - Helping them understand risk assessment and, above all, management
  - Diffusing scientifically-based sound perception of the possible risks
  - Allow communities to access techno-scientific knowledge through balanced language and contents
  - Keep constantly related all the issues implied by risk
    - Social, political, economical, institutional and cultural
  - Create pre-conditions for and stimulate the community/stakeholders participation in decision making about how risk should be managed

A multi-year specific communication strategy and plan are essential
The basic facts 1.

- Analyse the audience
  - What they want to know
  - What is needed for them to understand
  - What is realistically achievable
  - What differences separate sub-groups

- Set your objectives with honesty and realism
  - Don’t downplay or overplay

- Earn trust and establish credibility
  - Be sure to understand people
  - Be accessible/available
  - Never assume without verification

- Learn of/from previous community involvement experiences
  - Assess existing perceptions and attitudes and expected behaviour
  - Establish the “degree” of the communication
  - Avoid re-inventing the wheel
The basic facts 2.

- Integrate risk strategy in the broader communication action plan of the local/central authorities
  - Fine-tune on tone, style of communication and content/message to which people are already used to
  - Build credibility on a broader picture of “care” for the community
  - Segment messages depending on groups/stakeholders

- Assume the risk assessment process as the key message
  - Make understand differences and various degrees of risk
  - Get people involved through interest to learn their specific situation

- Hire a communication specialist to plan the process
  - In order to keep the right momentum and continuity to the action
  - Amateurial approach can result in lack of foresight and planning, thus incurring in a complete failure
What to do next: when risk turns into crisis
When crisis is manifest

- Every crisis is, by definition, unexpected and somehow unpredictable

- Nevertheless it is crucial to be prepared in advance, simulating the various emergency scenarios, creating and tuning up the guidelines for crisis communication
Managing crisis with effectiveness

- **Quickness**
  - a rapidly evolving situation requires a fast reaction

- **One voice**
  - crisis brings confusion, it is crucial to speak with one voice with no hesitation or contradiction

- **Coordination**
  - cooperation between all actors/stakeholders involved

- **Emotive** participation and compassion

- **Acting / Communicating**
  - no news blackout, no defensive strategy, but proactiveness and willingness
Managing follow-up to crisis

- Even though the first moments of a crisis are often decisive, it is also very important to manage what comes after.

- From a communication perspective, it is recommended to monitor (with the appropriate surveying techniques) the perception of public opinion regarding the organisation's behaviour and response throughout the crisis.

- Furthermore, it’s also recommended to promote a communication campaign, devoted to underline the efficiency and the ability of the organisation in handling the crisis (if the handling of the crisis is successful, of course........)

- A number of organisations gained standing and improved their public image after a successful crisis management, diffusing a sense of reliability and increasing people’s trust.
One example from a different story
Promptness is not all what is needed

- In one of the most tragic aerial disasters of the last decade, 747 TWA flight 800 from New York to Paris, exploded at high altitude still reaching to its cruising slot.

- The disaster was appaling, TWA reacted quickly:
  - Within 13 hours the communication manager was in New York having been flown in from London that same night
  - In a matter of hours all TWA board was fully operative having recollected from a St. Louis venue
  - within 23 hours all the passengers relatives’ were informed by person
  - within 24 hours the TWA Trauma Team – whose head flew in from his vacation in Southern California - was fully operative

- Nevertheless, all handbooks point to the TWA case as an example of completely failed communication practice........
Basically, TWA approach to media and publicity was inadequate:

- A unique and central crisis communication center was never constituted
- TWA had problems collecting, processing and handling internal information and updates (Twa managing director communicated a wrong number and year of construction of the plane)
- Twa homepage was replaced with a blank page reporting a brief press release, never updated for weeks after the plane crash
- Twa’s crisis hotline received a huge number of calls, but nobody (relatives or journalists) was ever called back after the “crisis”
To summarise......
Some tips for action

- Accept and **involve the public** as a legitimate partner
  - Information not persuasion
  - Build participation to create consensus

- **Plan carefully** and evaluate your efforts
  - Study, analyse, segment, conform, adapt

- **Listen** to the public’s specific concerns
  - Be a credible referent

- **Be honest, frank and open**
  - .....but take care of cultural differences

- **Coordinate and co-operate with all stakeholders**
  - Local as well as central
Some tips for action

- **Know the media** (and learn to handle them!)
  - They like sensations and shouting more than truth and sound information
  - Clear and straightforward messages

- **Acknowledge sufferance** (physical and psychological)
  - Either feared or experienced

- **Track progresses** and evaluate your plan strengths and areas for improvement
  - Create a circular process of enhancement
  - Look at other experiences
Thanks for your time!

MKTP Marketing Territoriale srl
Via Bogino 9, 10123 Torino, Italy

t. +39/011815902
f. +39/0118134560

i.canteri@mktp.it
info@mktp.it