

Foreword

INFORMATION IS A PRECIOUS COMMODITY

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The jury's back, the verdict's in and while for many the answer has been self-evident, communication is core business in emergency management and response.

The need to engage a vulnerable community before, during and after a disaster is the key to their survival and the rebuilding — both physically and emotionally.

In any crisis or disaster, no matter how massive or small, information is the most precious commodity. How soon will help be here? How many people are in danger? Will we get any fresh water? When will the rain stop? Where is my dog? What route should we evacuate by?

The questions come from all directions. And throughout the emergency and the recovery period there will be the ever-present media, sometimes with its own agenda but more importantly as a partner and conduit for messaging.

Perhaps it is self-evident but for communication to be effective there must be those willing to listen. The listeners might be amongst the public; they may be within our organisations; or they may be those who have difficult decisions to make. There is evidence that in some emergency agencies the art of listening – by giving cognisance to the voice of experience – may not be sufficiently developed. Indeed, it is clear that in some agencies the public affairs or communication department is seen as a soft target for cuts in resources, or to be ignored when it comes to the serious nature of communication skills, training and consultation on using effective publically-accessible language.

One agency went as far as to take away the mobile phones from its media staff, ostensibly to save dollars! At a national level, advice of professional communicators – focus tested by a sizeable public group – was ignored for the wording of important warnings, in favour of what the 'technicians' thought should be used!

But why is communications a soft target? As communicators we have been inclined to be blasé at developing a sound argument, expecting others to understand what we think is the blazing obvious. A sound argument needs to be based on solid facts, well-researched data, and where possible tested evidence. As communicators we instinctively spend our time looking forward to opportunities and are prone to skip

the need to secure any record of achievements, or to simply archive processes and results. This lack of record is of little help to the researchers who come looking at how effective, or not, our efforts were.

Yet there are some like-minded professional communicators in the emergency sector who are endeavouring to raise the profile and concerns, and promote the achievements of the hundreds of operators in the sector in Australia. They formed Emergency Media and Public Affairs (EMPA) Ltd, aiming to advance the profession of the emergency or crisis communicator. They aimed to create an association that would bridge the gap between the communicators and their several areas of contact, namely emergency management's senior officials, the planners and policy makers, and on-the-ground emergency responders, both paid and volunteer alike. Plus the group sought to forge links with the researchers and media studies teachers and lecturers who are at the coal-face of learning in our fast-moving society. In 2010 EMPA will host its fourth annual conference of crisis communicators with speakers coming from offshore. The organisation is developing professional accreditation and has been approached to expand overseas.

Crisis Management is a specialist area, often overlooked and misunderstood, or at best taken for granted until it's all that is left. The challenge of reaching audiences with accurate and up to date information and safety messages in situations where normal communication channels are often failing, demands rigorous methodologies, preparation and engagement at all levels of management. The opportunities for crisis communicators to meet and share their experiences and learnings and to knit their enthusiasm for professional cooperation are limited and EMPA aims to correct this. See EMPA's website at www.emergencymedia.org.au for more information.

About the author

Peter Rekers is the current Director of the Emergency Management and Public Affairs Research and Development Centre. He is the principal of public affairs firm, Crisis Ready. He is also an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland.