On being "transparent" in dealing with public health threats and emergencies that involve food and agriculture

By Jim Evans

[Fourth in a series of professional development features for IFAJ members and others regarding crisis communicating. Produced through a partnership of IFAJ and the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois.]

"**Be more transparent."**

That advice is being directed, internationally, to all parties involved in communicating about public health threats and emergencies. We are talking here about scientists from universities and industries, interest groups (such as consumer and environmental), public authorities, educators and the media.

What does transparency mean and what does it do?

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes transparency as communication that is candid, easily understood, complete and factually accurate. "Transparency characterizes the relationship between the outbreak managers and the public. It allows the public to 'view' the information-gathering, risk-assessing and decision-making processes associated with outbreak control."

- It builds trust by showing how outbreak managers are systematically seeking answers.
- It exposes weaknesses in outbreak management structures and operations, so provides a strong incentive for deliberative and accountable decision-making.
- It helps balance the rights of individuals against information directly pertinent to the public good and the public's need and desire for reliable information.

www.who.int/infectious-disease-news/IDdocs/whocds200528/whocds200528en.pdf, p. 4

Hard lessons learned.

"History must not be allowed to repeat itself. To avoid this, transparency needs to be the first order of the day," the WHO concluded in a recently published influenza pandemic handbook. The organization was referring to "the lessons of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Countries which have been most effective in combating the disease are not the ones with the most sophisticated medical infrastructures, but those, such as Uganda, that have been most open in communicating about the disease."

www.who.int/csr/don/Handbook_influenza_pandemic_dec05.pdf, pp. 15-16

Commenting on responses to anthrax incidents in the U. S., Melissa Shepherd of Emery University reported, "The biggest lesson we learned following the anthrax cases was that silence is not neutral. You are sending messages with silence whether you intend to or not. The message the public may receive from silence is that things are out of control. We need to think of establishing a dialogue with the public that includes built-in opportunities for feedback. Only then can we be sure that we are truly communicating - resulting in a public that is both informed and empowered."

www.whsc.emory.edu/_pubs/ph/spring03/save.html, p. 4

Emergencies involving food and agriculture have generated similar calls for transparency. Public-frightening experiences connected with a 1996 outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease) in the United Kingdom offer an example. A 4,000-page report of the BSE Inquiry identified delayed or mismanaged research, unsupported public reassurances, organizational information failures and other problems. The inquiry concluded that governments and scientists must be open with the public and must trust the public to respond rationally to uncertain risks. Lord Phillips, a member of the inquiry committee, observed that "Public trust can only be established if communications about risk are frank and objective [and] in particular, there must be openness about uncertainty."

www.bseinquiry.gov.uk

http://web.library.uiuc.edu/asp/agx/acdc/view.asp?id=C11449, p. 5

http://web.library.uiuc.edu/asp/agx/acdc/view.asp?id=C23670, p. 207

Nods of agreement from agricultural journalists.

Agricultural journalists can react to calls for transparency with a knowing nod of agreement. In times of crises involving food and agriculture, their business as journalists is to help make emergency situations more transparent, more open and responsive to the publics involved. They are, in fact, trained to do so.

What about communicators working in other organizations and settings during the pressure-cooker confusion and disarray of public health threats and disasters? They, too, are called to communicate with greater transparency and openness.

How journalists and other communicators can help achieve transparency.

Here are some recommended guidelines and ideas that journalists and others might consider in their efforts to communicate effectively about public health threats and emergencies that involve food and agriculture. Some or all of such guidelines may be useful in a wide range of emergencies: pandemics, social strife, prolonged droughts, food crises, floods, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, volcano eruptions, agroterrorism and other natural or human-created disasters that may occur.

1. *Ways to sound the alarm*. Writing in *Perspectives in Health*, Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard offered 10 recommendations for communicating about the risk of bird flu. Note that the recommendations help create openness and transparency. Note also that most are counter-intuitive.
    - Start where your audience starts. "The biggest barrier to sounding the alarm about bird flu is that it's flu - usually seen as a ho-hum disease." So early messages might acknowledge that people think flu is minor and that "we have all ignored influenza for too long."
    - Don't be afraid to arouse fear. "Fear appeals have had a bad press, but the research evidence that they work is overwhelming." Such appeals may help by stirring precautionary thinking and action.
    - Acknowledge uncertainty along with expressions of wishes/hopes.
    - Share dilemmas and invite the public to help address them.
    - Give people things to do. Authors refer to WHO guidelines, which suggest (a) providing preventive measures people can take and (b) pointing to information people might learn to make themselves safer.
    - Be willing to speculate, responsibly. "Like hurricane forecasters, we have to offer both worst-case scenarios and likelier scenarios, always acknowledging that we may turn out to be wrong."
    - Don't get caught up on the numbers game. "Battles over how many people an H5N1 pandemic might kill are pointless."
    - Emphasize the magnitude more than probability. The rationale for bird flu preparedness "isn't that we're sure it's coming, but how bad it could get."
    - Guide the adjustment reaction that typically occurs - the temporary fearfulness or excessive caution. Tell people what to expect. "This is the teachable moment. Don't ignore it or ridicule it; guide it."
    - Inform the public early and aim for total candor and transparency. "These are two of the hardest risk communication recommendations for governments to adopt."

    www.psandman.com/articles/MagzEng_05.pdf, pp. 7-9

2. *Release the bad news immediately*. This is among the risk communications lessons that Sandman drew from the mad cow crisis. "The crises that are most likely to get out of hand are those that seem to keep getting worse."
    www.psandman.com/articles/mad-cow.htm, p. 2

3. *Be careful with risk comparisons*. "The statistical seriousness of risk (magnitude x probability) is relevant, but so are trust, dread, familiarity, and control," Sandman and Lanard caution.
    www.psandman.com/articles/who-srac.htm, p. 3

4. *Acknowledge errors, deficiencies and misbehaviors*. "People tend to be more critical of authorities who ignore things that have gone wrong than they are of authorities who acknowledge those things," Sandman and Lanard observe.
    www.psandman.com/articles/who-srac.htm, p. 2
5. *Encourage open reporting about research.* Owen Roberts and his associates at the University of Guelph, Canada, experienced the value of open research reporting several years ago when biotechnology crop field tests were in their infancy.

    "An anti-technology activist group rose up against such tests being conducted on one of the university's research farms. The group held a hastily called news conference (an hour from Guelph), didn't invite us or inform us, and proceeded to decry the 'secret research' the university was engaged in with these field trials.

    "The story made the front page of one of our country's leading daily papers. We braced for the worst - it was the summer, and it would have been prime season for activist activities at the research site.

    "Fortunately, as part of a good-neighbour policy, we had issued a news release earlier in the season informing the district media about the field tests, and invited them to come and see the plots (one did, and wrote about it). Neighbours had also been sent letters by the chair of the crop science department, explaining the tests and inviting questions.

    "A day after the story broke, media railed in editorials against the anti-technology group for not having done its research. Accusations of 'secret research' were dismissed by the media, and without reporters' attention the wind was knocked out of the anti-technology group's sails. The potentially nasty campaign fizzled…and it was mainly because of one proactive news release."

6. *Consider civic journalism approaches.* Journalists may be able to encourage transparency in reporting about public health threats and emergencies by using the perspectives of civic/public journalism. Civic journalism (related to what is known in some regions as development journalism) steps beyond the notion that journalists and their audiences are only spectators in efforts to address public issues.
    www.cpn.org/topics/communication/civicjourn_new.html

    Civic journalism approaches are designed to encourage public conversation, create forums for discussion of issues, reveal public opinions and perspectives, and increase civic participation. They do

not involve the journalists in taking sides. Instead, such techniques use the independent stance and platform of journalists to help their publics address and resolve issues.

Here are several ideas in the spirit of civic journalism that agricultural journalists might consider. They are based on results of research and experience such as that identified in web resources identified by live links.

- Provide special ways for audiences to learn and participate. Here are a few examples:

  a) Citizen/audience panels
  www.piercelaw.edu/risk/vol2/summer/renn.htm

  b) Consensus conferences or other venues for mediation and negotiation
  http://web.library.uiuc.edu/asp/agx/acdc/view.asp?id=C24622

  c) Learning events, such as a beef barbeque sponsored by the Northeast Ag Information Network for consumers, producers and public officials during a BSE scare in the U. S.
  www.agrimarketing.com/issues.php3?year=2004, March issue, id=23942

- Expand opportunities for feedback from audiences. Example: information technologies such as computers and the Internet that can convey regularly updated information in a manner that can be "interactive, personalized, entertaining, and non-judgmental."
  www.whsc.emory.edu/_pubs/ph/spring03/save.html, p. 4
- Diversify sources and voices in coverage.
- Establish news collaborations with other organizations.
  www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/research/r_interacttwo.shtml

A transparent process is not problem-free.

Obviously, transparency in emergency communications and management is not problem-free. For example, the reader may be interested in transparency issues identified by Ragnar Löfstedt of King's College, London.

www.aei-brookings.org/admin/authorpdfs/page.php?id=939, pp. 8-10

The WHO also acknowledged limitations. "Transparency, by itself, cannot ensure trust. The public must see that competent decisions are being made. But, in general, greater transparency results in greater trust."

www.who.int/infectious-disease-news/IDdocs/whocds200528/whocds200528en.pdf, p. 5

What experiences and advice might you share about helping achieve transparency in covering public health threats and emergencies related to food and agriculture?

What reporting resources have you found helpful?

Please pass them along to help your fellow IFAJ members, and others. Send them to the author (evansj@uiuc.edu). Thank you.