
SESSION 2:

Believe me, I'm a doctor

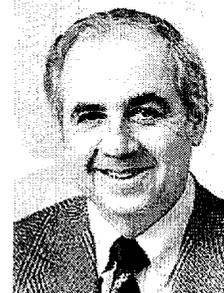
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Moderator: Pilúca Nuñez

Monday, 4-Feb-2002 10:30

Credibility is the first principle

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Keypoint

- *If credibility is not cultivated over time, if it is therefore lacking when a crisis arises, no matter how artful the message, it will not be persuasive.*

Summary

The first principle of an effective public affairs program on nuclear energy is credibility. If credibility is lacking, no matter how artful the message, it will not be persuasive.

There has long been a problem in the United States. For years much of the industry followed the practice, when there was an event at a nuclear power plant that resulted in an unplanned release of radioactivity, to tell the public there was “no release” if in fact the release was below the technical specifications of what the NRC mandates as being safe.

At a nuclear power plant 40 miles from New York City two years ago, after a steam generator tube ruptured, a company executive first said there had been no release, and then subsequently backtracked to admit there had been a small release. This became the headline story the next day in the New York Times, other newspapers, and on radio and TV.

That was both unfortunate and unnecessary, in that there had been no health hazard to the public. But what was taken to be initial dissembling became the story, alarming local citizens who suspected the true danger was being hidden and raising the anger of local political leaders and members of Congress, a residue of that bad feeling continues to this day.

There is little question that the public handling of the incident damaged the believability of the company during subsequent problems at the plant.

In an effort to prevent such avoidably negative news coverage, and the undermining of credibility, we took the initiative to propose that in the event of such an unplanned release that the licensee promptly send a radiation monitoring team to the site boundary and then tell the press and public two things: 1) there has been a minute release but 2) prompt readings at the site boundary showed no measurable increase in radiation and thus no hazard to public health and safety.

Thus far at least three major nuclear operators—Exelon, Dominion Resources and Nuclear Management Co.—have incorporated the suggestion into their emergency preparedness procedures. Others have it under consideration.

The NRC, as you well understand, is a safety regulator. We can tell nuclear power plant operators what to do, or not do, when it comes to safety. But we don't have the right to tell them what to say to the public.

So I took it upon myself to try to persuade the industry that it was in its interest—and ours—for them to change a long-standing practice. Starting shortly after that unfortunate incident two years ago, I began making speeches at various industry conferences, on crisis communications and emergency preparedness, most of them sponsored by the Nuclear Energy Institute, the trade association representing the nuclear power plant owners.

I did this in Cleveland, Ohio, in Galveston, Texas, in Washington, DC, in St. Petersburg, Florida, and at a Harvard School of Public Health course in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at which most of the class was from the industry.

Some companies saw the merit of the idea right away, the first convert being Exelon, the largest of the nuclear operators in the U.S. Others were reluctant to make the change.

Let me cite an example. Last May the NRC participated in an emergency exercise run by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was a big one, with about 400 FBI agents involved. The scenario involved simulated attacks by terrorists against facilities of a commercial nuclear power plant in the Southwest. (This, you will note, was four months before the kamikaze attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.)

In the NRC's first press release, issued after the situation had escalated from what we call an Unusual Event to an Alert, we said: "As part of the reactor shutdown, operators are venting steam into the atmosphere. The steam contains minute amounts of radioactivity, well below safety limits."

When we belatedly received the first three press releases from the company, they included the categorical statement: "There has not been a release of radiation and there is no threat to the public as a result of these events."

I had one of my public affairs officers call his counterpart at the plant and point out that this would be exactly the sort of thing reporters would pounce on in a real event. And guess who's credibility would be damaged? The licensee was urged to accurately reflect the situation in future press releases.

A short time later a top company official called to complain to the NRC Commissioner who was heading the NRC's Executive Team at headquarters during the exercise. The company official was indignant at the disparity between the two characterizations, saying in effect that the company had always characterized such situations as not involving releases.

However, in subsequent press releases, the company modified its language, abandoning the "no release" statement.

In my talks to industry groups, I have stressed the mutual advantage of talking straightforwardly, clinching the argument with the assertion that in all such cases, the NRC would accurately describe what we understood was happening. When we believed there had been a small radiological release, we would say so, trying to put it into perspective of course.

At least three state emergency preparedness organizations, led by New York, have changed their reporting rules, no longer allowing companies the option of saying "no release (above technical specifications)" in their reports to state authorities. And the Nuclear Energy Institute has recently begun a concerted effort to persuade its members to change their prior practice in this regard.

This example may have resonance in other societies. For the first principle of effective communications must be credibility.

This is especially important in light of the newly heightened global concern about potential terrorist attacks on nuclear facilities. If the public has cause not to believe a company official about a radiological release at a nuclear power plant, why should he be believed when he says the plant is well protected against a terrorist attack? Credibility, after all, is indivisible. Once lost, it's very hard to restore.

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Keeping the public informed about risk without alarming them

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Keypoints

- *Highlight the role of the public authorities by providing them with strategic and logistical support by working together in partnership.*
- *Involve the local participants up front (elected representatives, decentralised state services and the medical profession (doctors and pharmacists) to enable them to relay the information.*
- *Adopt a marketing and advertising approach by increasing the number of supporting media used with attractive images and visuals.*
- *Demonstrate openness and transparency: provide the public with the opportunity to express their opinion and have their questions answered.*
- *Consider this campaign as an opportunity to develop or strengthen relations between the plant and the local players involved.*

Summary

Following the decision of the French Secretary of State for Health in April 1996, an initial campaign of iodine tablet distribution, within a 10 km radius around nuclear plants was organized by the public authorities in 1997. This decision, which implicitly recognises nuclear risk, forced the public authorities and EDF to initiate communication on the risk, which had never been really addressed. It took the form essentially of an information campaign on the measures to protect the public in the event of a nuclear accident and in particular the effectiveness and methods of iodine protection.

1997: first distribution campaign

The public authorities chose distribution through pharmacies in exchange for a collection coupon, sent to all the households in the area concerned. A broad-based awareness-raising and information campaign, taking a very official tone, was implemented targeting both opinion leaders and the public. In addition to press relations and the distribution of information brochures, there were a number of specific information meetings in this campaign for opinion formers (the medical professions, elected representatives, teachers) and public meetings in which, under the auspices of the public authorities, the Regulator, the decentralized health services of the government and the nuclear operator took part.