Managing Media Relations

Public Health Communications Webinar Series

July 18, 2019

NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials

Webinar Objectives

- Introduce basic principles of interacting with and pitching local media
- Understand different types of media communications tactics, (e.g., press releases, backgrounders, media advisories and press briefings)
- Learn best practices for educating media partners on health topics/data to avoid inaccuracy

NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials

Agenda

- **Media Relations Principles & Tactics**
  - Richard Sheehe, Senior Strategist, Merritt Group
- **Case Study: Ottawa County Department of Public Health (Michigan)**
  - Kristina Wieghmink, Public Information Officer
- **Q&A**

NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials

Merritt GROUP

NACCHO 2019 Public Health Communications Webinar Series: Managing Media Relations

Richard Sheehe

Senior Strategist, Merritt Group

Senior Research Fellow, George Mason University Dept. of Communications

July 18, 2019

Learning Objectives

Understand conceptual keys to effective media interactions

Navigate the media, messaging and interview techniques

Leverage media relations tools and templates: You don't have to start from scratch!

An Integrated, Strategic Communications Approach

Informed by evidence-based leading practices and a cross-disciplinary perspective derived from Richard's background in journalism, PR, marketing, education & research.

Primer Exercise:
Importance of “Storytelling”

An individual has been described by a neighbor as follows:

“Steve is very shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure and a passion for detail.”

Q: Is Steve more likely to be a librarian or a farmer?

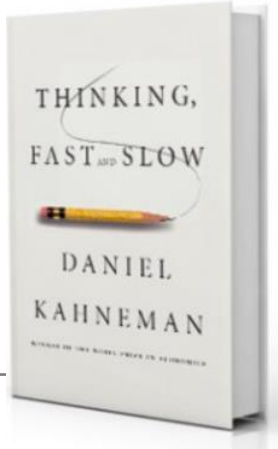
The Importance of “Storytelling”

An individual has been described by a neighbor as follows:

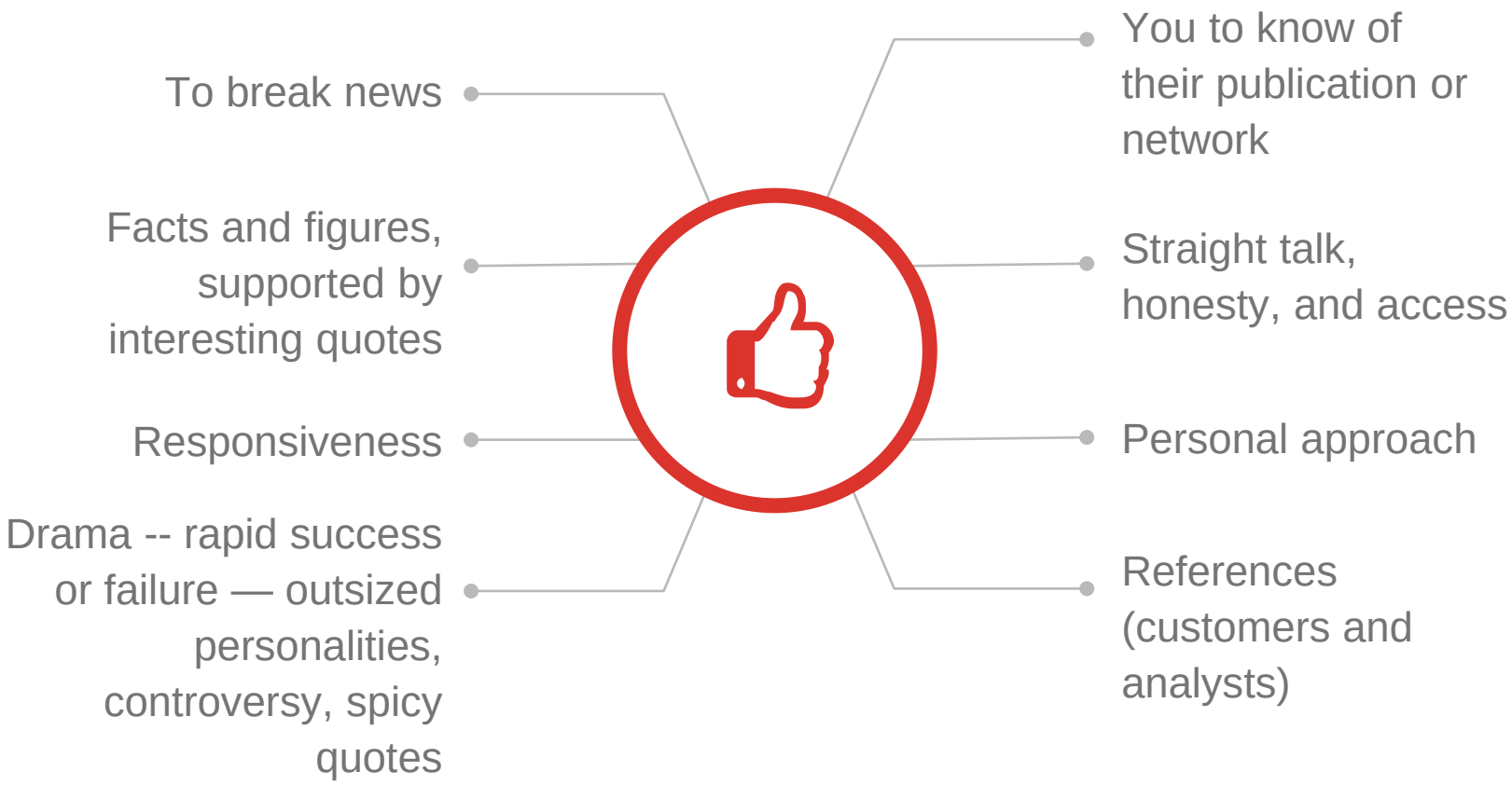
“Steve is very shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure and a passion for detail.”

A: Steve is at least 18x more likely to be a farmer.

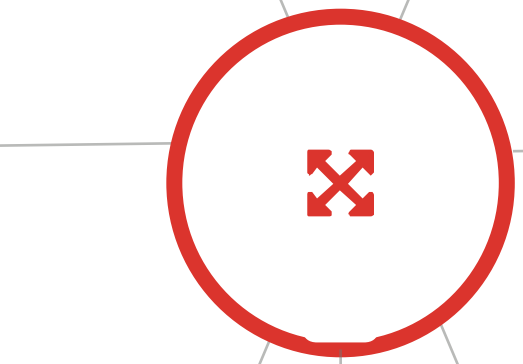
THE UPSHOT: Our communication style must leverage narrative & storytelling...
...including tech, engineering, science, etc!



WHAT REPORTERS WANT



WHAT **YOU** WANT



Leverage the media as a resource to reach many stakeholders

Tailor interaction to situational factors (ie: crisis vs. ribbon cutting)

Avoid confusing the interests of the media with the interests of your organization and stakeholders

Maintain “Message Discipline” and stay on topic...

Maintain polite locus of control during the media interaction

….while still maintaining people skills, staying human and approachable

Remember that a media interaction is, above all, a business interaction.

Never confuse a friendly interaction with friendship!

SUPPORT YOUR **STORY** WITH SOLID MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

SUPPORT YOUR **STRATEGY** WITH SOLID GRASP OF SITUATION & GOALS

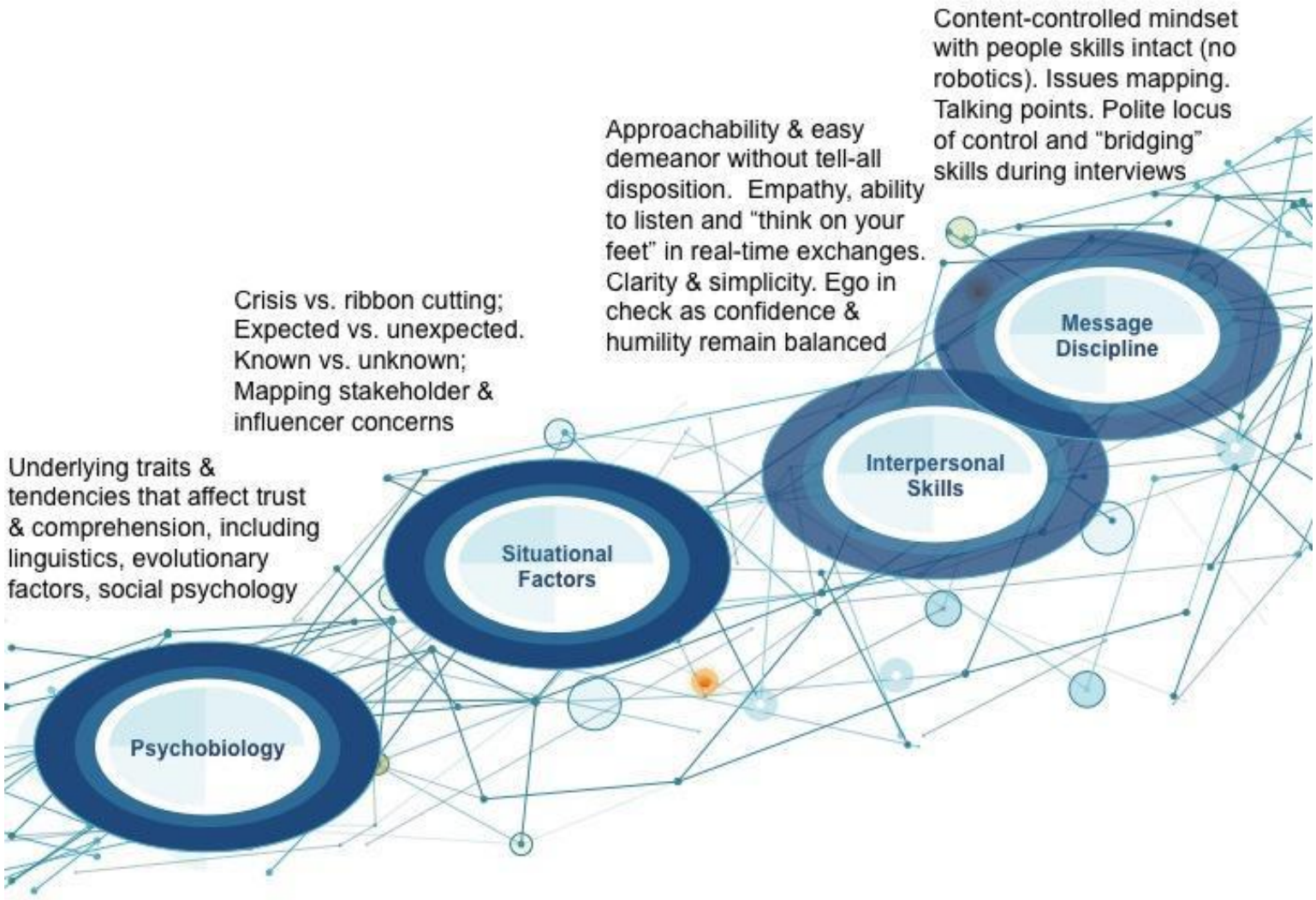
KNOW YOUR STORY:

- Develop key messages and have sound bytes ready to optimize quotability
- Balance facts and figures with anecdotes and illustrations
  - This reaches the broadest variety of stakeholders
- Use 3rd party endorsements

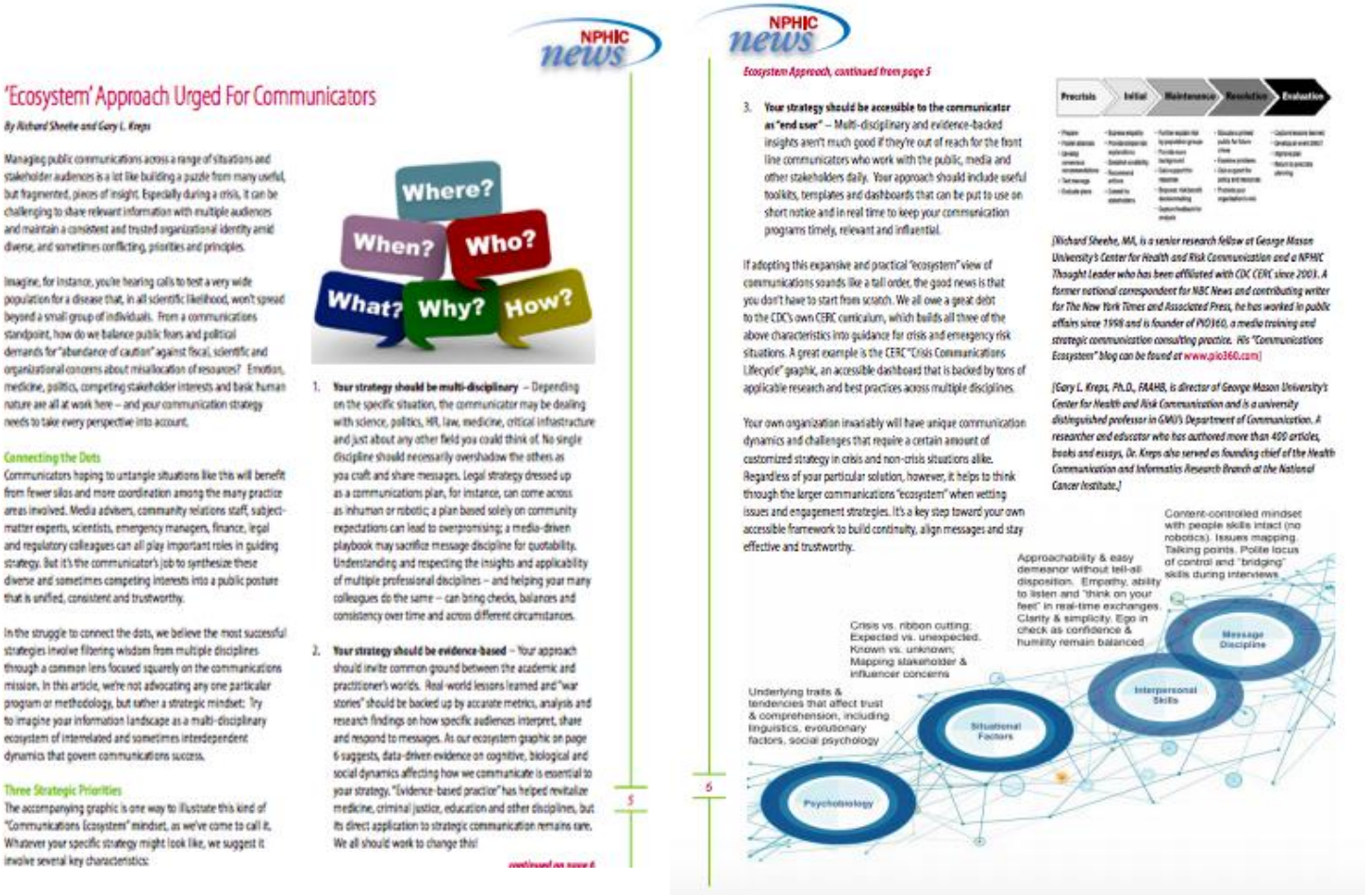
DEFINE YOUR OBJECTIVE AND THE MEDIA'S OBJECTIVE:

- What are you being interviewed for?
- What is the potential loss/gain? Any controversy?
- Will stakeholders, consumers, partners, and customers understand your message?

THE COMMUNICATIONS "ECOSYSTEM"



More on the Communications Ecosystem



NPHIC news

'Ecosystem' Approach Urged For Communicators

By Richard Sheehe and Gary L. Kreps

Managing public communications across a range of situations and stakeholder audiences is a lot like building a puzzle from many useful, but fragmented, pieces of insight. Especially during a crisis, it can be challenging to share relevant information with multiple audiences and maintain a consistent and trusted organizational identity amid diverse, and sometimes conflicting, priorities and principles.

Imagine, for instance, you're hearing calls to test a very wide population for a disease that, in all scientific likelihood, won't spread beyond a small group of individuals. From a communications standpoint, how do we balance public fears and political demands for "abundance of caution" against fiscal, scientific and organizational concerns about misallocation of resources? Emotion, medicine, politics, competing stakeholder interests and basic human nature are all at work here – and your communication strategy needs to take every perspective into account.

Connecting the Dots

Communicators hoping to untangle situations like this will benefit from fewer silos and more coordination among the many practice areas involved. Media advisers, community relations staff, subject-matter experts, scientists, emergency managers, finance, legal and regulatory colleagues can all play important roles in guiding strategy. But it's the communicator's job to synthesize these diverse and sometimes competing interests into a public posture that is unified, consistent and trustworthy.

In the struggle to connect the dots, we believe the most successful strategies involve filtering wisdom from multiple disciplines through a common lens focused squarely on the communications mission. In this article, we're not advocating any one particular program or methodology, but rather a strategic mindset: Try to imagine your information landscape as a multi-disciplinary ecosystem of interrelated and sometimes interdependent dynamics that govern communications success.

Three Strategic Priorities

The accompanying graphic is one way to illustrate this kind of "Communications Ecosystem" mindset, as we've come to call it. Whatever your specific strategy might look like, we suggest it involve several key characteristics:

1. **Your strategy should be multi-disciplinary** – Depending on the specific situation, the communicator may be dealing with science, politics, HR, law, medicine, critical infrastructure and just about any other field you could think of. No single discipline should necessarily overshadow the others as you craft and share messages. Legal strategy dressed up as a communications plan, for instance, can come across as inhuman or robotic; a plan based solely on community expectations can lead to overpromising; a media-driven playbook may sacrifice message discipline for quotability. Understanding and respecting the insights and applicability of multiple professional disciplines – and helping your many colleagues do the same – can bring checks, balances and consistency over time and across different circumstances.

2. **Your strategy should be evidence-based** – Your approach should invite common ground between the academic and practitioner's worlds. Real-world lessons learned and "war stories" should be backed up by accurate metrics, analysis and research findings on how specific audiences interpret, share and respond to messages. As our ecosystem graphic on page 6 suggests, data-driven evidence on cognitive, biological and social dynamics affecting how we communicate is essential to your strategy. "Evidence-based practice" has helped revitalize medicine, criminal justice, education and other disciplines, but its direct application to strategic communication remains rare. We all should work to change this!

continued on page 6

NPHIC news

Ecosystem Approach, continued from page 5

3. **Your strategy should be accessible to the communicator as "end user"** – Multi-disciplinary and evidence-backed insights aren't much good if they're out of reach for the front line communicators who work with the public, media and other stakeholders daily. Your approach should include useful toolkits, templates and dashboards that can be put to use on short notice and in real time to keep your communication programs timely, relevant and influential.

If adopting this expansive and practical "ecosystem" view of communications sounds like a tall order, the good news is that you don't have to start from scratch. We all owe a great debt to the CDC's own CERC curriculum, which builds all three of the above characteristics into guidance for crisis and emergency risk situations. A great example is the CERC "Crisis Communications Lifecycle" graphic, an accessible dashboard that is backed by tons of applicable research and best practices across multiple disciplines.

Your own organization invariably will have unique communication dynamics and challenges that require a certain amount of customized strategy in crisis and non-crisis situations alike. Regardless of your particular solution, however, it helps to think through the larger communications "ecosystem" when vetting issues and engagement strategies. It's a key step toward your own accessible framework to build continuity, align messages and stay effective and trustworthy.

[Richard Sheehe, MA, is a senior research fellow at George Mason University's Center for Health and Risk Communication and a NPHIC Thought Leader who has been affiliated with CDC CERC since 2003. A former national correspondent for NBC News and contributing writer for The New York Times and Associated Press, he has worked in public affairs since 1998 and is founder of PIO360, a media training and strategic communication consulting practice. His "Communications Ecosystem" blog can be found at www.pio360.com]

[Gary L. Kreps, Ph.D., FAAHB, is director of George Mason University's Center for Health and Risk Communication and is a university distinguished professor in GMU's Department of Communication. A researcher and educator who has authored more than 400 articles, books and essays, Dr. Kreps also served as founding chief of the Health Communication and Informatics Research Branch at the National Cancer Institute.]

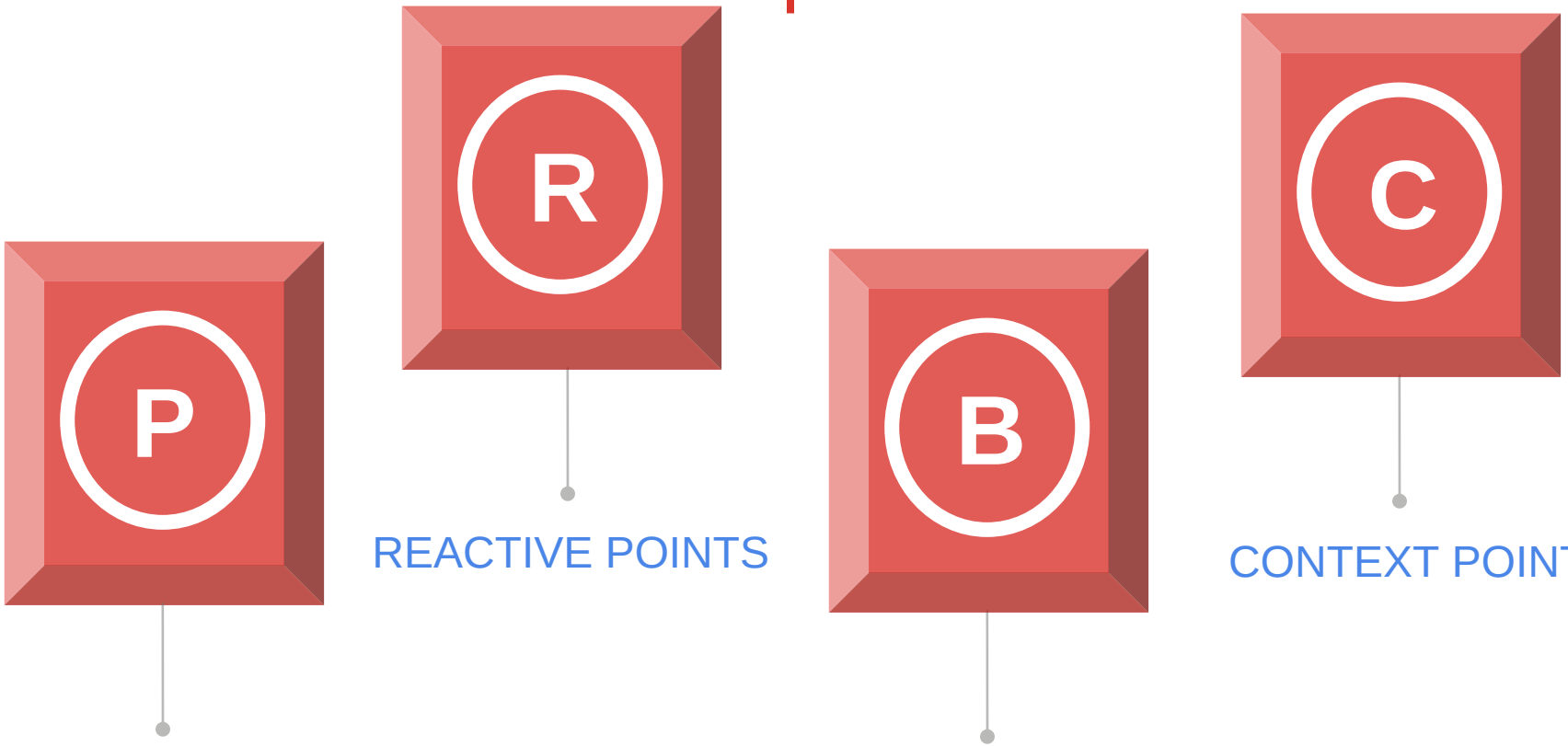
NPHIC News Article: (archived at https://bit.ly/32t9eKG)

FRAME OF MIND

Make sure to convey:

- Openness and “Empathy”
- Common interests
  - “Zoom out” to find shared goals
  - “Zoom back in” to establish POV from a starting point of consensus
- Emotional balance
  - Keep any of your own strong emotions in check
  - Avoid urge to match any negative rhetoric/tone of the questioner
- Sense of teamwork (“We” instead of “I”)

INTERVIEWS & REAL-TIME MEDIA RELATIONS: CONSTRUCT **ALL** YOUR ANSWERS FROM **4 KEY "BUILDING BLOCKS"**



PROACTIVE POINTS

REACTIVE POINTS

BRIDGES (or bridging)

CONTEXT POINTS

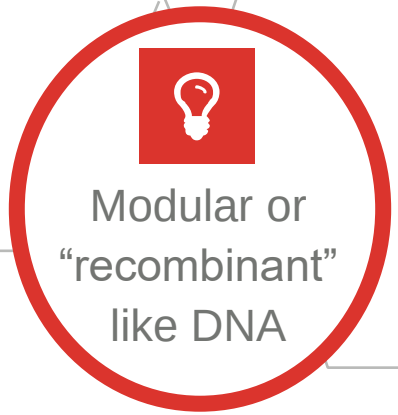
CONSTRUCT **ALL** YOUR ANSWERS FROM **4 KEY "BUILDING BLOCKS"**

PROACTIVE POINTS

Positive points you want to make and introduce wherever possible, including key messages and preferred sound bytes

REACTIVE POINTS

Uncomfortable or low-priority issues you should be ready to address if asked. Answers should be brief, with bridge to proactive or context points



BRIDGES (or bridging)

Brief phrases to smoothly pivot away from uncomfortable or off-topic questions back to preferred territory.

- ❑ "One of the key things to keep in mind is.."
- ❑ "It's important to remember that…"

CONTEXT POINTS

Broad and quotable points on context and/or process around an issue. Easy destination for bridging...and always counts as useful info

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The media is not your end stakeholder, only a conduit to them.
- Your media interactions require advance strategy and preparation wherever possible.
- Your strategy and tactics should be informed by evidence-based best practices and a grasp of the broader “Communications Ecosystem”
- Your real-time media interactions should rely on communications building blocks and message discipline.
- Tools, templates and processes can enhance consistency, efficiency and impact of your media relations efforts...YOU DON’T HAVE TO START FROM SCRATCH!

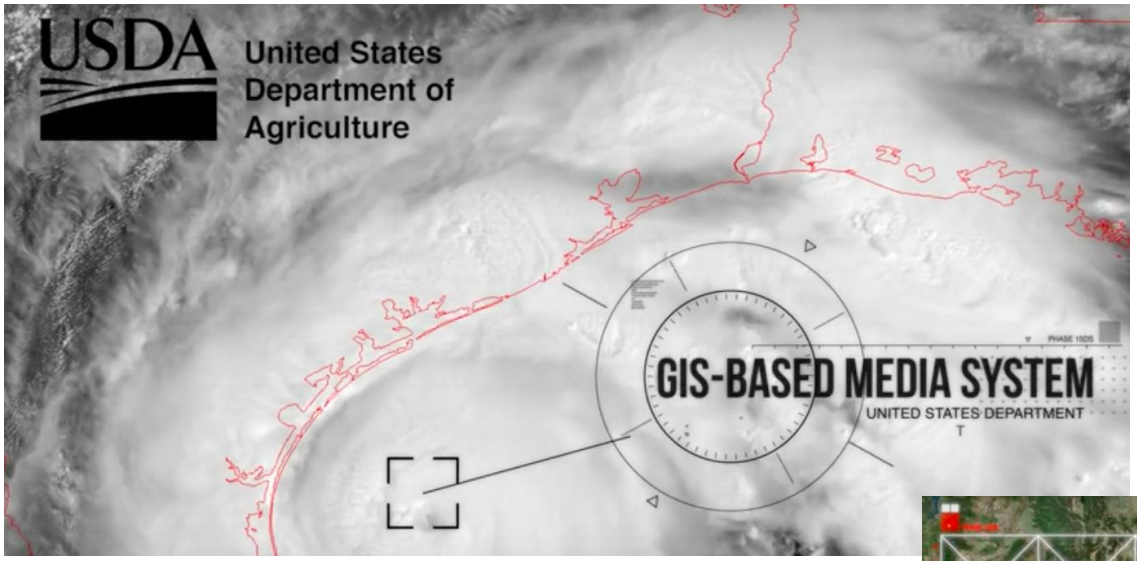
YOU DON'T HAVE TO START FROM SCRATCH!

Lots of media relations tools and templates exist, including those freely-available by and for government communicators (e.g., CDC – CERC).

More info at https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/

YOU DON'T HAVE TO START FROM SCRATCH!

Another example: USDA's NEW GIS-BASED MEDIA SYSTEM

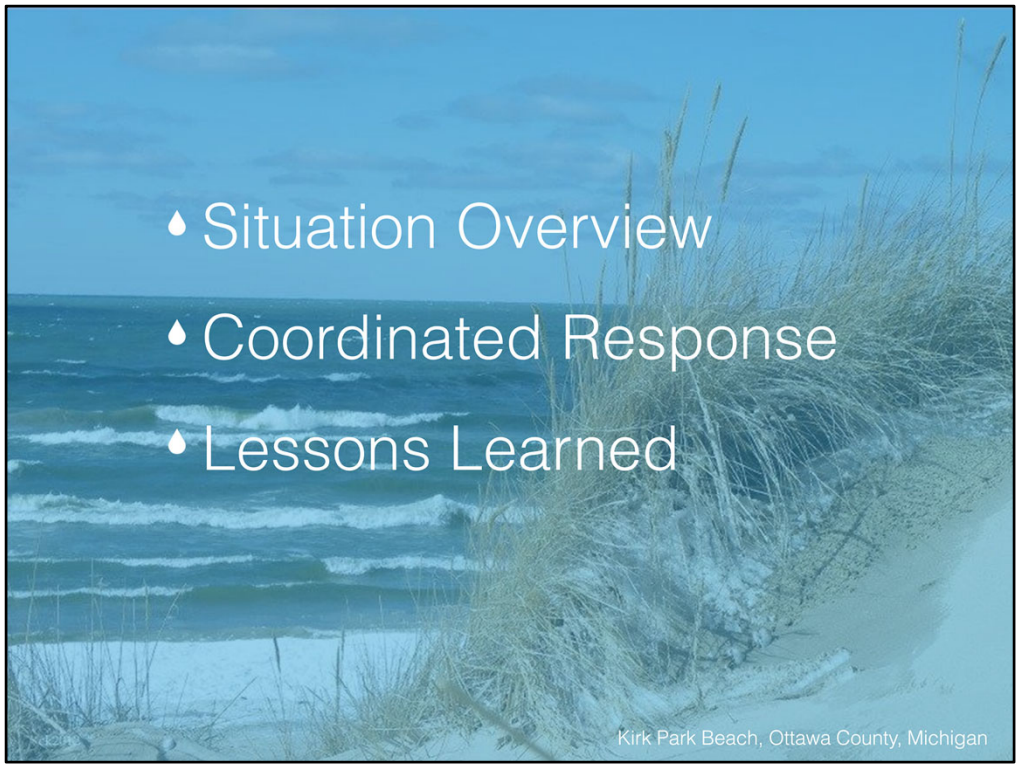


More info:
YouTube Video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPqYgq2g0II

Dirk Fillpot
USDA Office of Communications

Merritt GROUP

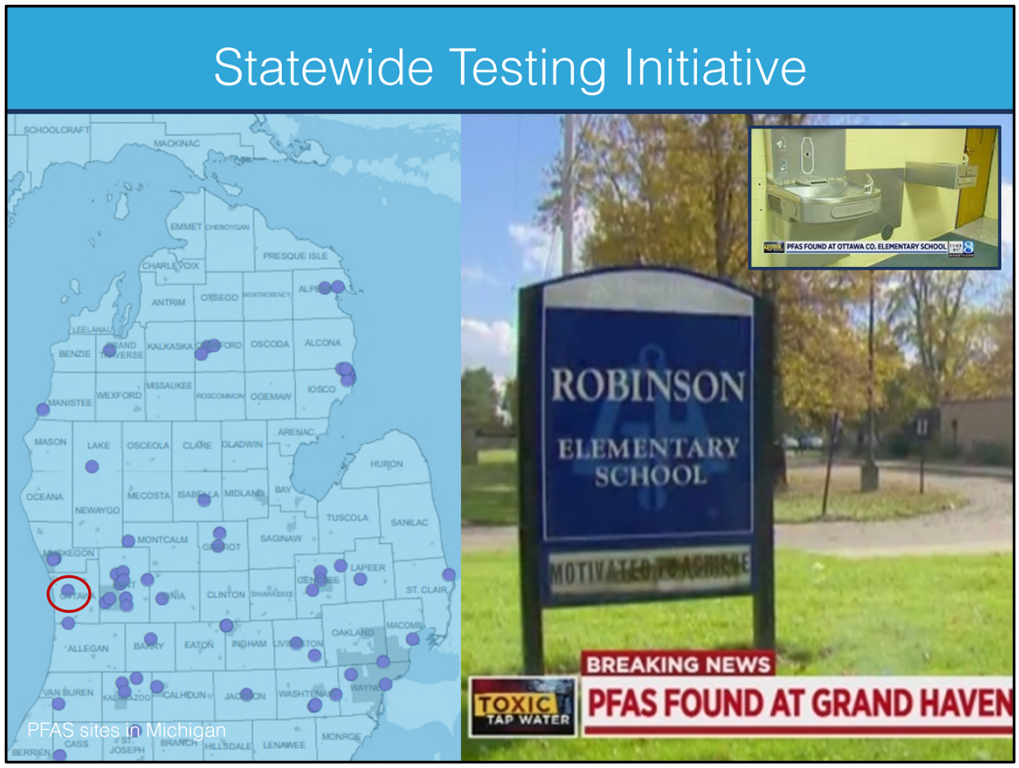
Thank you to everyone who took the time to attend today. I appreciate the opportunity to share our experience.



In my presentation, I will cover three sections. First an overview of the P-FAS situation in our community, next our coordinated response by all stakeholders involved and lastly, I'll talk about our lessons learned.

Before diving into our case, I want to share the foundation we used to base our response. Throughout the journey, I focused on the six principles from CDC's Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication to guide the process and our actions.

Be First – Be Right – Be Credible – Express Empathy – Promote Action – and Show Respect.



To give an overview of the situation; beginning in April of 2018, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (or EGLE) implemented a statewide program to test Michigan's public water supplies, including schools with wells for Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (*per and poly-floor-el-coal substances* or P-FAS *[like fast without the t]*).

These chemicals have been used globally during the past century in manufacturing, firefighting and thousands of common household and other consumer products. They are persistent in the environment and in the human body – meaning they don't break down and they can accumulate over time. In recent years, experts have become increasingly concerned by the potential effects of high concentrations of P-FAS on human health, thus it is an emerging public health issue.

The EPA had set a Lifetime Health Advisory level for two P-FAS chemicals in drinking water. The level was set at 70 parts per trillion for P-F-O-S and P-F-O-A combined. The State of Michigan used 70 ppt for decision-making purposes during this statewide initiative.

The testing found that only two supplies in Michigan had PFOS and PFOA combined over the EPA Health Advisory Level of 70 ppt. This was the City of Parchment and Robinson Elementary School here in Ottawa County.
The state collected the school's water samples last September and received the results back October 29 which had PFOS and PFOA combined at 110 ppt and total P-FAS at 144 ppt. Needless to say, the results from this rural school was a shock, since other P-FAS sites

around the state were mainly related to the use of Class B foam at airports and industrial waste sites surrounding tanneries – neither of which are nearby the school.

At the state level, the Michigan P-FAS Action Response Team (or MPART) led the testing initiative. The agencies that make up this team are EGLE, the department of health and human services, the governor's office, department of agriculture, department of natural resources and other state agencies and experts in the field. Locally, the response agencies included Robinson Township, Grand Haven Area Public Schools and Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, our health department, Ottawa County emergency management and county administration.

This is where the first three CERC principles became crucial:
Be First – Be Right – Be Credible.

The most important communication objective was to develop a coordinated AND vetted response by all stakeholders that would address the public's concerns by providing consistent messages to the public and media. As you can imagine, with about a dozen agencies involved, this was a challenge.

Quickly, the other three CERC principles worked into our response: Express Empathy – Promote Action – and Show Respect. To address the public's concerns, it was imperative that we approached the situation through the eyes of the parents and residents who had been affected. We provided the facts on what we knew, what we were doing about it or the process, when people could expect an update and what they could do in the meantime. People primarily want to know if their families are safe, how the situation affects them, what caused it and who is fixing it. We can begin answering these questions by promplty responding to media inquiries with clear and accurate information to reach your target audience.

Upon receiving the school's water test results, we notified the school principal and superintendent and they immediately shut-off access to the school's drinking well water. They gave bottled water to students and staff for drinking and cooking that was initially supplied by Ottawa County Emergency Management.

By late afternoon, the state collected a second confirmation sample at the school; as well as a sample from a nearby fire station and a daycare center adjacent to the school. The results were expedited and came back two days later which still showed elevated levels at

the school but not the other locations. The investigation began by first looking at historic records for potential sources in the area and obtaining information on groundwater flow direction to determine the next steps. This eventually led to establishing a study area and testing dozens of other residential wells, installing monitoring wells, collecting groundwater and pond samples, soil samples and investigating possible sources.

Throughout the investigation, besides the school, only one residence came back with an elevated level above the EPA's lifetime health advisory. Regardless, anyone who had their wells tested by the state in the study area and had any detection of P-FAS in their drinking water was offered an under-the-counter kitchen filtration system and had it installed, all at no charge.
There was already much public anxiety and heightened awareness about P-FAS in our local media due to a neighboring county already working through a large and ongoing investigation of contaminated private wells near tannery dump sites.

To give you a comparison and show you the range of P-FAS contamination in Michigan, one of the residential wells in our neighboring county that is near one of the industrial dump sites, tested positive for PFOS and PFOA combined at more than 37,000 ppt. whereas Robinson school was at 119 ppt.

If you want more information about the tannery investigation, Google Wolverine World Wide P-F-A-S. Mlive published a timeline article this past June that gives a good overview of the situation.
Regardless, with so many unanswered questions about the long-term health effects of P-FAS coupled with children drinking contaminated water, we had an urgent matter at hand that required immediate action.

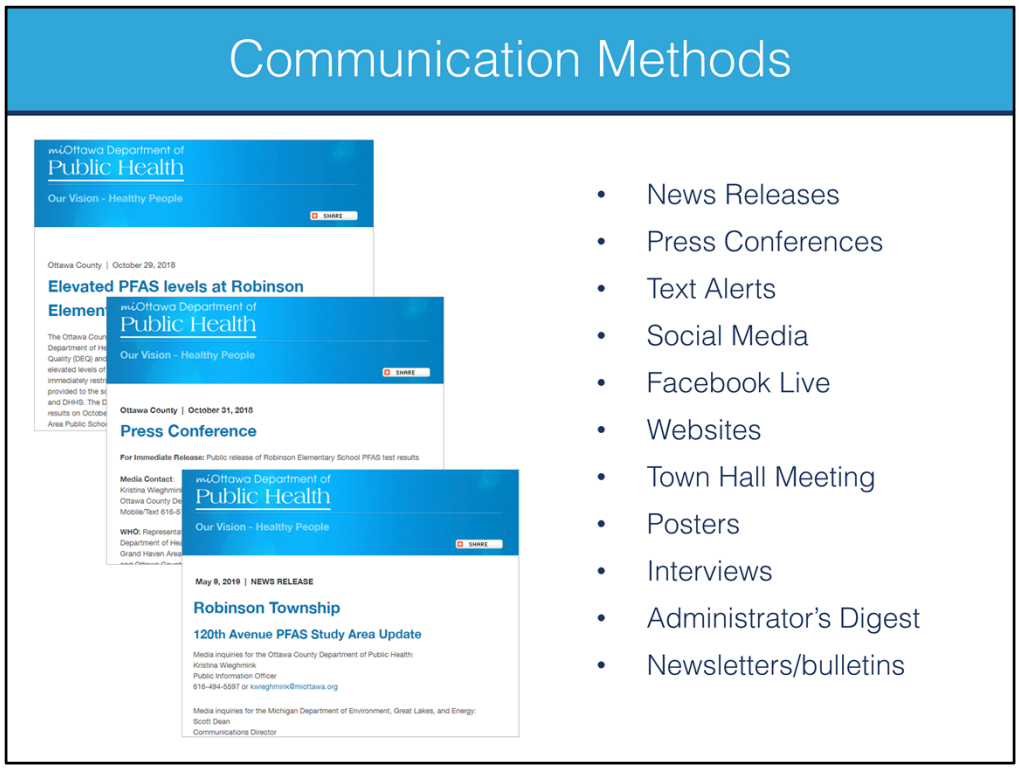
One of the biggest public health communication challenges of this P-FAS response was not having enough data to know the long-term effects these chemicals could have on someone's health. Additionally, it was a challenge to explain the scope of the problem based on what science we did have and convey what the limited data meant.
We didn't want to make light of the situation or minimize people's concerns and we also didn't want to invoke panic or anxiety because of missing information.

We kept to key messages for the public and media that were clear and simple based on what we knew at the time:

One: Drinking is the primary way P-FAS can get into the body.
Two: Washing hands and other skin contact is not considered a health concern as P-FAS does not move easily through the skin.
and Three: P-FAS health problems are not immediate. If you drink high levels of P-FAS chemicals over time you could be more likely than the average person to develop some health problems in the future.

We also gave clear call-to-action:

One: If you're concerned about P-FAS exposure, contact the state toxicology hotline, which we provided.
Two: If you are within the study area, please be available for well testing when we contact you.
and Three: If you are not within the study area and are concerned about your well water, contact the state for residential water testing options, which we also provided the contact information and online resources.



In this slide is a list of some of the main communication methods we use in responses.

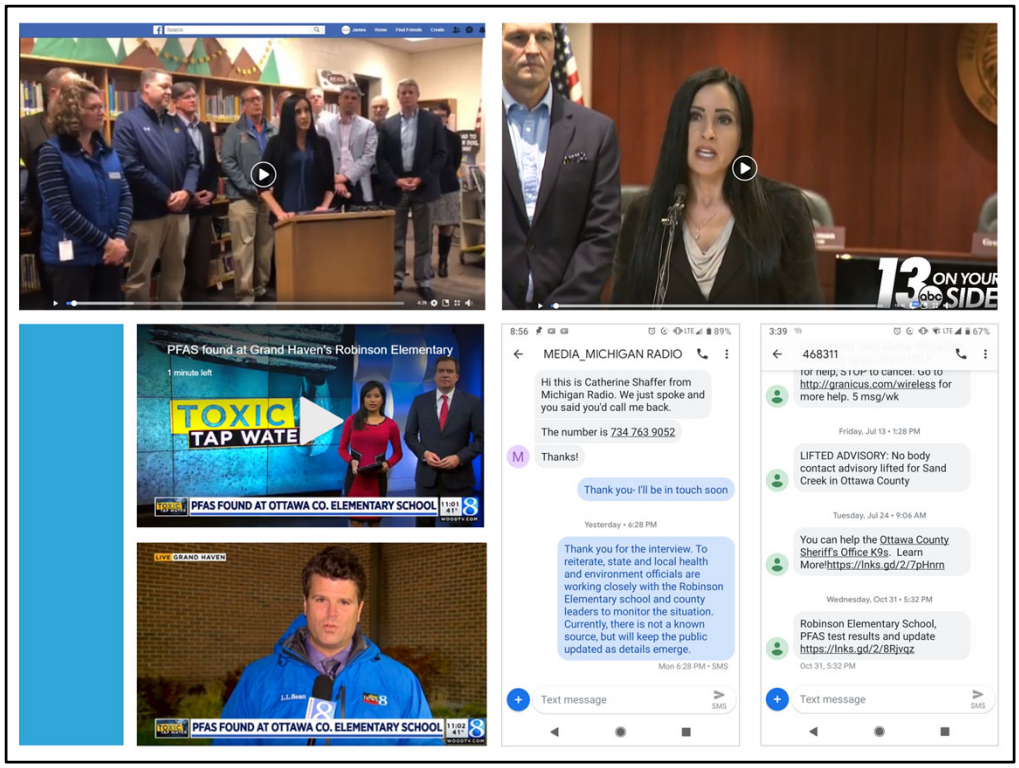
We wanted to make sure that we were the ones shaping the message by being first, being right and being credible. So, it was imperative that all response stakeholders contributed, reviewed and approved message drafts before delivery. The public and media look to the government agencies as the experts and the ones to resolve the issue, so our messages must be coordinated and consistent.

The morning of receiving the school's first test results, we initiated our incident command system and established a joint information center or JIC with all responding agencies. First virtual via several conference calls and online, then eventually moving the JIC to the county administration building for ease of communications among response agencies.

While the state agencies led the testing and investigation, we wanted to have a local presence with a local face to address this local issue. State and local officials, the school and township agreed to designate our department as the lead agency; and me, the public information officer or PIO as the lead spokesperson.

That's not to say we sailed the communications ship alone. When we created news releases, press conference and interview talking points, printed materials and digital content; each response agency contributed copy, reviewed and approved drafts to ensure coordinated and consistent messages and delivery.

In addition, each agency still had a their own lead spokesperson so that during press conferences, in particular, the agency representative could articulate their role in the response.



In the next few slides, I captured some images to give you an idea of various points of media relations or interactions. The first press conference happened on the day we received the initial school water test results. Pictured in the upper left is where one of the reporters streamed it live on Facebook at the school.

The response team had been working all day at the JIC, where we were coordinating our message and determining our next steps. We all agreed that the school would notify their board and the students' parents about the situation before we sent out the news release. The parent letter, along with the news release contained details of what we knew about the situation and what we were doing to address it. I sent out the release that afternoon and was ready for media calls. The calls started coming in but reporters were also starting to show up at the school shortly after school let out for the day.

The school is only about 15 minutes away, so I raced over there to start staging the reporters to the school side parking lot. I greeted each one, provided my business card and told them I would be back in about ten minutes with more details on where to set up if they wanted to get their gear ready.

Most local media were already on-site and preparing for the conference but I still received some calls and texts, and managed to at least give a brief interview for a news radio station on the phone in the midst of coordinating all this.

I went inside the school, pulled together the agency representatives from EGLE and the

school, along with board of commissioners, congressmen and other elected officials who showed up on the scene into a conference room to have a briefing. I went over the situation, ensured we had the appropriate representative from each agency ready with coordinated talking points to accompany me on camera, if needed. I also arranged with the school faculty on designating space for a news conference that could accommodate the media.

I went back out to the parking lot, rounded up the reporters and escorted them into the library where they could set up their equipment. I went back to the conference room and reiterated our SO-CO, our single overriding communication objective with the stakeholders, which was: The drinking fountains have been shut off. Bottled water is provided to the students and staff. We are investigating the situation and developing an action plan to help ensure the water our children drink meets appropriate state and federal standards.

After the news conference, I stayed to make sure the reporters finished collecting their b-roll and left the building.

The second news conference happened two days later at the county administration board room when we received the second confirmation test results. The response team had been working all day in the county emergency operations center where most agency representatives were also present. Those from the state who were not present were with us on conference call most of the day where we developed the next communication objectives and started drafting the public health action plan. At this news conference, we had designated spokespeople from each agency involved who could articulate their agency's role in the response.
I opened the meeting, presented the new results and introduced the state agency representatives to talk about the next steps. The school district superintendent gave a statement about what the school was doing as far as developing a long-term solution. The county emergency management director gave a statement about the use of firefighting foam at a nearby firestation, indicating they did not use P-FAS containing foam for training and explained a bit more about its use.

Lastly, the state health and human services department provided what information we knew about P-FAS and its effects on health. We opened up the floor for reporters to ask questions and ended the meeting after there were no more.

At both news conferences and the town hall meeting, reporters used Facebook Live and real-time tweets to involve the public. In between events, people were continually engaging on social media. Particularly, the residents of Robinson Township on their Facebook group page. It is an open group, which allowed us to monitor conversations and gauge public concerns to provide additional resources. I continually monitored media stories through Google alerts and watched various news outlets online. I logged nearly 100 stories or media interactions over the course of six months or more in regards to this P-FAS response.

You can see here at the bottom left that various media professionals who were at the same news conferences or received the same news releases still developed somewhat differing headlines to give their story a spin. Overall though, they seemed to cover the stories well and mostly accurate. There was only one instance, this past May, where I had to urgently contact a reporter upon reading his story. We issued a news release about the investigation status and the likely source. I offered clarification to the reporter as a way of requesting a correction. The reporter immediately complied and updated the story to read more accurately and not be misleading.

Another part of coordinating messages was to ensure all responding agencies' websites had the same consistent content. Our county created a specific landing page and shortened url for easier access to the information and resources we wanted people to have. That is miOttawa.org/P-F-A-S.

Last February, in the midst of the ongoing investigation, we pulled together a town hall meeting. Despite there being a blizzard that day, we had a full house. We wanted the public to have the opportunity to voice their concerns, hear directly from us about the public health action plan and ask questions.

Representatives from all of the response agencies were present. I moderated the event and the presenters included an EGLE district supervisor, a state geologist and toxicologist.

When people first arrived, you could see some of the concern and anxiety on people's faces but by the end of the event people opened up and felt heard. They also saw we truly were working our hardest to take action and protect public health.

One of the takeaways from this experience is that it's important to establish relationships and a reputation with media professionals before an emergency. In addition to introducing yourself to them, another way to gain their trust as a credible health resource is to respond to media inquiries and do interviews when possible when you are not in crisis mode. Also, be accessible and be respectful of their deadlines. Try to meet their deadlines as they have a busy day to get your story aired accurately on the evening news.

A few tips about media relations and conducting interviews, that I find useful are to talk in sound bytes so your key messages are clear, simple and memorable. Anticipate and prepare ahead of time for any questions that may come up, especially the tough ones. Get them worked out by doing your research and consulting with the subject matter experts before you go on camera. Prepare and know your key message to bridge back to it if an interview goes off-topic or if questions are asked that you are not able to the provide information – never say no comment and never say anything you wouldn't want to be broadcasted to the public! There is no off the record and news spreads extremely fast in this digital age. Also, stay away from jargon and use positive statements.

Another part of this lesson learned is that it's been advantageous for our department to know ahead of time which subject matter experts are my superstars. These are people in our department who are willing to do interviews at a moments notice that I have already worked with or media-trained them. Because typically, reporters won't give you previous notice. What usually happens is I'll get a call around 10 am, shortly after the beat reporter receives story assignments from their news editor or producer. The reporter will request an

on-site interview by 2 pm so they can air the story on that evening's news. We often get called upon for our expertise in epidemiology, immunizations and environmental hazards.

Taking a proactive approach not only builds relationships, but the earned media is also an opportunity to give your public service announcement and showcase your department's brand. But more importantly, get your public health awareness or prevention message out to the public, your true target audience.

At the end of the interviews, be sure to restate your main message and where people can go for more information. Also, thank the reporter for running the story and exchange contacts so if they need more information, resources or clarification, you can be sure to get it immediately to them and help drive an accurate story.

The second lesson is that the situation is not about me or my organization. It's about the public's concern, anxiety, fears and guiding them to take the appropriate actions. In addition, don't minimize their anxiety, get defensive or be condescending. We may not understand what they are facing, but we can show empathy and acknowledge their anxiety about uncertainty.

Here is a list of some of the communication tools I use on a daily basis. Please send me an email if you'd like any links.

Again thank you and I hope you found this information useful.

Information about the Robinson PFAS source:

Later this past Spring during the phase of the investigation that could be completed after the ground thawed, we released the information about the most likely source. Our SO-CO was that based on the previously gathered data and the newly found presence of P-FAS compounds in soil samples, along with evidence of elevated concentrations of P-FAS in groundwater at Robinson Elementary School and the Robinson Township Fire Department, indicated that P-FAS compounds may have been released at both locations. EGLE explored whether this could have been caused by the use of Aqueous Film Forming Foam, known as A triple F or Class B Fire Fighting Foam. However, the fire department indicated A triple F is not possessed nor historically used, and the Fire Department does not have any historical knowledge of A triple F being applied in the area. An investigation by EGLE confirmed the foam currently used by the fire department does not contain P-FAS.

It was further noted that A triple F has been available since the 1960s, and it is possible that it was applied in the area during an era that pre-dates the knowledge of anyone currently associated with the fire department. No other potential sources such as illicit dumping or disposal of industrial waste have been identified.

Q & A

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Thank You

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