

Giving Public Presentations of Risk Information

Katherine A. McComas, Ph.D.

University of Maryland



JOINT INSTITUTE FOR FOOD SAFETY AND APPLIED NUTRITION
Food Safety Risk Analysis Clearinghouse

www.foodriskclearinghouse.umd.edu

What This Tutorial Covers

- Clarifying your presentation objectives
- Tips for preparing presentations
- Guidelines for preparing overheads and slides
- Suggestions for pacing yourself
- Tips for conducting public meetings and evaluating their success

What Is Your Objective?

- When presenting risk information to the public, risk communicators should first determine the objective. Is the objective:
 - To clarify?
 - To inform?
 - To persuade?
 - To engage in discussion?
 - To solicit feedback?
- Different techniques will facilitate different objectives.

Tips for Presentations

- Here are some tips for giving presentations, adapted from Crosscombe and Grace (1999-2000)
 - Advance Preparation
 - Check out the room
 - What is the layout of the room and the seating?
 - Is anything obscuring people's view?
 - How is the sound from the back of the room?
 - Where is the overhead projector?
 - Where can I stand and not block anyone's view?

Tips for Presentations

- Advance Preparation cont'd.
 - Check out the equipment
 - Does the equipment work?
 - Do I have backup in case the equipment does not work (e.g., overhead slides or handouts if the computer projector does not work).
 - Is the projector focused?
 - Is it very loud so that I have to speak over it?

Tips for Presentations

- Advance Preparation cont'd.
 - Check out your presentation
 - Have I directed my talk to the right audience. Do I use jargon or too much technical language for my audience?
 - How long does my talk take? Is it too long or too short?
 - Who will time me so that I don't run over my time?
 - Do I prefer to read from note cards, slides, or speak extemporaneously?
 - Have I scripted out anything that I should not forget to say?
 - Have I anticipated questions that I might be asked?
 - Have I practiced sufficiently?

Preparing Overheads and Slides

- Here are some additional guidelines for preparing overheads and slides (Crosscombe & Grace, 1999-2000):
 - Use appropriate fonts and sizes
 - Titles: minimum 30-36 pt.
 - Subtitles: minimum 24 pt.
 - Text: minimum 18 pt.
 - Aim for consistency in fonts and sizes
 - Only use ALL CAPS for titles or single words or phrases, not for entire passages of text.

Preparing Overheads and Slides, cont'd.

- Use color appropriately and sparingly
 - Make sure that the color you use for fonts stands out from the color you use for backgrounds.
- Keep visuals simple and readable
 - Avoid complicated tables with too many columns and rows
 - Resist photocopying a table from an article or book and putting that on an overhead – the text is almost always too small to read!
- Avoid the temptation of putting too much information on each overhead or slide.

Pacing Yourself

- Here are some suggestions for pacing yourself when you give a presentation (Crosscombe & Grace, 1999-2000):
 - Consider whether you want people to wait until the end of your talk to ask questions or to ask questions during your talk, if questions should arise. Then let your audience know.
 - Leave overheads or slides on long enough for people to read them,
 - But don't feel the need to read them word-for-word to your audience. Talk about them; don't read them!
 - Don't put too much information on your slide.

Pacing Yourself, cont'd.

- Lay a pen on the overhead to act as a pointer
 - Avoid the overuse of shaky hand-held laser pointers.
- Obscure parts of the slide only when necessary.
- Turn off the projector when it's not in use.
- Allow time during the presentation or at the end for questions from the audience.
- Consider providing your audience with handouts outlining your talk before or after your presentation.

Tips for Conducting Public Meetings

- A common forum for public presentation of risk information is the public meeting.
- Here are some tips for conducting successful public meetings (McComas, 2001)
 - Before the meeting begins
 - know the audience and anticipate its needs and concerns
 - make sure that the meeting is well-publicized in advance
 - choose the right timing for the meeting (e.g., don't schedule meetings during holidays or too late in the decision-making process)
 - have a clearly stated, agreed-upon purpose for the meeting

Tips for Conducting Public Meetings

- Before the meeting, cont'd.
 - plan the technical presentations with care (e.g., limit their length and complexity; rehearse them in front of colleagues; field possible questions)
 - select the right location, building, and room size for the meeting
 - use a format that is appropriate to the meeting's topic and purpose
 - schedule the right equipment, staff, and agencies
 - prepare good handouts (e.g., fact sheets and agendas)

Tips for Conducting Public Meetings, cont'd.

- At the meeting
 - encourage dialogue and one-on-one interaction between officials and the public before, during, and after the meeting
 - Arrive early and leave late
 - have a strong facilitator run the meeting, keep it focused, and set and uphold “ground rules” of civility
 - be open, honest, and candid with the audience
 - be flexible enough to allow for a quick change in formats (e.g., if a larger-than-anticipated audience arrives)

Tips for Conducting Public Meetings, cont'd.

- After the meeting
 - demonstrate to the audience how its comments were incorporated into the outcome
 - Provide thorough, written responsiveness summaries, which are available to the general public, to questions and comments raised at the meeting
 - promote continued dialogue with citizens
 - via phone calls, site visits, or additional public meetings

Ways to Evaluate the “Successfulness” of Meetings

- Here are some indicators of successful public meetings, according to people who conduct them (McComas, 2001):
 - To believe that the right people attended the meeting.
 - To believe that the audience considered the meeting worth their time in attending.
 - To perceive that officials had connected with the audience.
 - e.g., officials left with a better understanding of the audience’s expectations, as did the audience of the agency’s)
 - To believe that the meeting received fair and balanced media coverage.
 - To be thanked on the way out the door.

References

- Crosscombe, P., & Grace, K. Creative visuals. In *Graduate teaching development workshop series handbook*, 1999-2000 edition, pp. 185-190.
- McComas, K.A. (2001). Theory and Practice of Public Meetings. *Communication Theory*, 11, 36-55.