

“Watch Out!”

Precaution Advocacy Fundamentals (Page 1 of 4)

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Precaution advocacy is high-hazard, low-outrage risk communication. The goal is thus to arouse an apathetic public to action. Everything follows from that.

1. Keep it short.

Apathetic people have a short attention span. We’re talking about an eight-second news sound bite, a 15-second public service announcement, a one-page flyer, or maybe at most a 10-minute presentation. (Of course you need longer messages for more interested publics too.)

2. Make it interesting.

Seducing attention is the essence of precaution advocacy. Even your very short messages need to be seductive; extremely successful seduction might earn you attention for a longer message. Boring messages are worse than no messages at all.

3. Stay on message.

When people are barely paying attention and may lose interest at any moment, you need to make every word count. Having decided what you think your best shot is, take it! Don’t get seduced into talking about some sidelight (unless of course it turns out that your audience is really interested in the sidelight).

4. Test your messages.

You’re interested in your topic and your audience isn’t – so your judgment about what’s interesting to the audience is probably unreliable. Don’t guess. Find out. If you can’t manage a scientifically sound study, an unsound study is enormously better than no study at all. Ask your mother, your kids, and your bus driver.

5. Plan for a slog.

Precaution advocacy is a slog – a marathon, not a sprint. It typically takes a generation for the public to absorb a new risk or a new precaution. Think about global warming and HIV, seat belts and smoke alarms. Of course you may fail altogether. But if you succeed, you’re very unlikely to succeed quickly.

6. Appeal to needs.

Persuasion theory in one sentence: Identify a need people already feel, remind them of that need as forcefully as you can, and then tell them you have a way to help them satisfy the need. Creating needs is much tougher. What existing needs can you connect to the precaution you’re advocating? Start with the obvious one, the need to feel safe. Then look for other needs to appeal to as well.

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7. Appeal to emotions – especially fear.

Emotions fuel action. For precaution advocacy the most appropriate emotion is obviously fear – fear that’s proportionate to the size of the risk. Trying to motivate precaution-taking without frightening people is like trying to write a novel without using the letter e. (Of course you should also help them bear their fear.)

8. See fear arousal as a competition.

If you suffer from “fear of fear” – that is, if you’re reluctant to alarm your audience – it may help to remember that you’re not going to make people more frightened in general. Fearfulness is a stable personality trait. You’re merely trying to compete for your slice of the fearfulness pie.

9. Don’t neglect emotions other than fear.

Although fear (along with its wimpy cousin “concern”) is the 800-pound gorilla in precaution advocacy, other emotions also play a role. People are often more inclined to take precautions on behalf of loved ones than on their own behalf, for example. And anger can sometimes motivate more precaution-taking than fear.

10. Give people things to do.

Precaution advocacy should be about precautions, not just risks. Even symbolic precautions are better than none at all. (If there’s nothing to be done, apathy is rational.) Sometimes, in fact, it’s easier to motivate precaution-taking first, then teach people about the risk they’ve already started protecting themselves against.

11. Give people choices of things to do.

Offering people a menu of things to do allows them to choose, which leads to a deeper commitment to the precautions they take. Surround your list of recommended precautions with two other lists: less difficult ones (“if you think we’re over-reacting”) and more protective ones (“if you think we’re not doing enough”).

12. Sequence recommended precautions.

The “foot in the door” principle of social marketing teaches us that if you ask for too much too soon you’re likely to get nothing at all. Ask first for something easy. Once people have made a behavioral commitment, pivot on it and ask for more.

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13. Think in stages.

People adopt precautions in stages. First they're unaware; then they're aware but unengaged; then they're engaged but undecided; then they decide to act but haven't yet acted; then they act; and finally they decide to keep acting. Each transition has its own communication strategies. For example, undecided people need to hear that the risk is dangerous, whereas those who have decided but not yet acted need to hear that the precaution is feasible and effective.

14. Focus resources on teachable moments.

Even apathetic people are occasionally more interested than usual. Such a teachable moment may occur when your issue is in the news, for example, or when it's featured in the plot of a popular television show. Anticipate these teachable moments (or provoke them), and make the most of them.

15. Be alert for a short-term over-reaction.

When people first learn about a risk, they may go through an “adjustment reaction” phase during which they imagine that the risk is already happening and take precautions that are excessive or at least premature. Adjustment reactions are vicarious rehearsals. They're useful. Don't bemoan them; guide them.

16. Be alert for signs of denial.

Sometimes people become so upset about a risk that they trip a psychological circuit-breaker and go into denial. Whereas saying alarming things to apathetic people alerts them into taking more precautions, saying alarming things to people in denial pushes them more deeply into denial – which makes them take even fewer precautions. It is vanishingly rare for precaution advocacy to overshoot, propelling people from apathy right into denial. What's not so rare is to misdiagnose denial as apathy – and therefore to prescribe the wrong “medicine”: alarming communications.

17. Identify and address persuasion facilitators.

Even apathetic people aren't blank slates for you to write on. They have pre-existing attitudes, emotions, and needs – and even some information. A big piece of precaution advocacy is figuring out what already predisposes people to do what you're urging, so you can remind them of it, reinforce it, and link to it.

18. Identify persuasion barriers – and consider addressing them.

Some of what's already in the minds of your audience members may predispose them against you rather than for you. For apathetic audiences, reinforcing what's on your side usually matters more than rebutting what's against you. But it's always worthwhile to identify the barriers too, and it's often worthwhile to address them – explicitly, respectfully, and empathically.

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19. Express empathy for apathy.

Some of what predisposes your audience against you is simply a disinclination to take on yet another worry and yet another task. You're trying to add to people's burden – yes, it's for their own good, but most people feel burdened enough already. The least you can do is show them you know that what you're asking is burdensome, and you wish you didn't have to ask. (Is there anything you want to suggest they can stop doing to make room?)

20. Consider an alternative: pre-crisis communication.

Perhaps some in your audience really are burdened enough already; perhaps your issue actually deserves their attention less than what's already on their plate. The alternative to precaution advocacy is pre-crisis communication. That means restricting your current messaging to the minimum they need to know now – for example, where to look for more information when the time comes. It means saving the rest for just-in-time communication if and when the need is urgent.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Medicine and Mass Communication: An Agenda for Physicians (1976) – <http://www.psandman.com/articles/medicine.htm>
- A Model of the Precaution Adoption Process: Evidence From Home Radon Testing, by Neil D. Weinstein and Peter M. Sandman (1992) – <http://www.psandman.com/articles/precautn.htm>
- Chapter 11, “Media Campaigns” in *Environmental Education & Communication for a Sustainable World*, edited by Brian A. Day and Martha C. Monroe (2000) – <http://www.psandman.com/articles/chap11.pdf>
- Why do people keep smoking? (May 2006) – <http://www.psandman.com/gst2006.htm#smoking>
- Why it's hard to persuade people to add pandemics to the long list of things they're worried about (Nov 2006) – <http://www.psandman.com/gst2006.htm#margot>
- “Watch Out!” – How to Warn Apathetic People (Nov 2008) – <http://www.psandman.com/col/watchout.htm>

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