

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS – CHOOSING YOUR WORDS

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Emergencies are a natural and unavoidable part of life. While many individuals may go through their lives without experiencing a major emergency, no society can expect to be so lucky – and nor should individuals assume that they will be among the lucky ones. As populations grow and as mankind develops technologies that can deliberately or accidentally have more widespread effects, the magnitude of ‘worse case’ emergencies also grows in terms of the number of people potentially affected. Natural disasters are also widely predicted to increase in severity and frequency as a consequence of mankind’s various impacts on the planet.

Recent experiences suggest that the likelihood of us being lucky enough to avoid emergencies is diminishing. At the same time, expectations of what emergency managers can and will do to help affected people avoid the danger appear to be growing, and more and more sophisticated response measures are being developed.

One of the key tools available to response managers is issuing emergency warnings. These can take many forms, but most visible are the warnings broadcast through the mass media – particularly as radio announcements or TV crawlers. Warnings ideally allow information to quickly reach large sections of the community, advising them of the danger and how to best respond.

At any given time, there are numerous warnings active around Australia. Many are relatively low key and specific, and many will ultimately come to nothing. As we have seen all too clearly though, some warnings are associated with events that will live long in the collective psyche of the country, affecting a far wider audience than just those directly affected.

However, like any communications, there is much more to an emergency warning than simply penning a few words and broadcasting it to the ether. We might expect that in an emergency situation we could expect to get better cut through and compliance than for other communications we might transmit – and it may in fact *be* better, but it is surprisingly far from perfect.

All the usual factors impacting on communications effectiveness apply to emergency communications, and there are some additional factors at work as well. Standard comms considerations of seeing the message, understanding it, accepting it and responding to it are all relevant. Then there are the unique factors associated with the emergency context – risk, the unknown, stress, and variations in personal circumstances which all impact on the receiver and the effectiveness of the message against its objective.

Writing warnings is therefore an important and difficult task, seeking to elicit timely and beneficial decisions and actions from recipients. Much time, energy and money is spent in the commercial and Government sectors trying to develop and deliver effective communications – but by any meaningful social measure, this is generally not actually *important* communication (to the receiver at least). Emergency communication is. All

people in Australia should have an interest in how these emergency communications work, and in continuously improving them.

Balancing the need for the inherent succinctness of the medium against that of a natural desire for detail means that every word has to be maximally effective. However, until this research there has been no guidance on specific words which should be used. There is much general literature about warning formats and the intent – but nothing to help agencies actually put the right words in the right order. The research undertaken by Colmar Brunton Social Research (CBSR) for the Attorney General's Department in 2007-08-09 has led to a practical working guide which can be applied across all hazards, providing what is expected to be a valuable resource for incident managers.

THE CHALLENGE

The Federal Attorney General's Department (AGD) has the co-ordinating responsibility for establishing agreed guidelines and protocols for the broadcast of emergency warning messages. Warnings are issued by individual agencies, and different states and territories have different protocols and internal arrangements. The role of the AGD was to set up a consistent national arrangement with the media that would be utilised at a more local level.

This has been a complicated issue to work though, but significant progress has been made. However, early on in the process it emerged that there was a lack of clarity around what should be in a warning message, and in particular what words should be used. From this, the first of several research briefs was developed. CBSR was the successful tenderer, and in addition to the first project there has been several subsequent extensions of the work to further develop the outcomes.

The fundamental challenge for the research was to provide a clear, practical guide to word selections that could be used by different agencies to support their varying internal protocols, maximising the consistency and effectiveness of word choices, and increasing the confidence of the incident managers who have to write the warnings.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

Initial Developmental Research

The first part of the research was expected to be a process of gathering existing material on word choices, reviewing and selecting the most relevant and well considered examples, and then testing them to identify the final recommended selection. However, the literature review stage found a wealth of *nearly* relevant material – but nothing that was done at the word level, which was what was of interest. We were able to generate a lot of useful contextual and background information, but virtually nothing in terms of material to actually test. This led to a slight rethink of the rest of the planned research.

14 focus groups were planned around the country in metropolitan and regional areas. The first three were intended to be 'validation' groups, while the remainder were 'testing' groups. In the absence of material to validate though, the first three became 'generating' groups instead. We already understood a lot about the concepts that needed to be conveyed in the warnings – type of event, severity (how bad it is), probability (how likely it is), when and where it will happen, and what to do. There were also more stylistic concerns – how to 'make it real' for people such that they were more likely to take action; and ensuring that we did not create panic.

In these first three groups participants generated a range of words to potentially express these important concepts – with the intention being to identify intuitive, commonly understood words that effectively convey levels and change for each. Groups were 2 hours in duration, and used fairly standard focus group techniques and structures to work through the ideas.

The testing groups were a little different, and a central platform for the research. Traditional focus groups are deliberately designed to be comfortable, inviting and constructive settings – because this normally facilitates better contributions from participants. However, when it comes to testing emergency warnings, this type of environment couldn't be further from the potential setting in which real warnings would be received and responded to. More importantly, the cognitive processing of material under stressful conditions is known to be different – and decision making is also different. Therefore, we needed to find a way of introducing an element of cognitive load and stress into the environment, so that participants could respond to the words in a more realistic manner.

Unfortunately, ethical and practical constraints precluded any consideration of staging an emergency that participants might think of as real, so a proxy had to be used. Instead, we put people into small teams, and gave them a competitive series of cognitively challenging tasks – and not enough time to do them in. Then, we constantly interrupted them to establish a parallel scenario in which they received a series of increasingly serious warning messages about an unfolding emergency. Each emergency scenario and the warnings was specifically written for the location – using real places and names, and describing a realistic type of emergency for that location. Emergencies included bushfires, earthquakes, floods, tsunami, chemical spills and others.

Participants really engaged in the two tasks – getting competitive and stressed about the challenges they had, and using the self complete forms relating to the scenarios, it was clear they also were processing and responding to the warnings. When it came to the de-brief, it was also clear that the interaction of the two had indeed impacted on their processing of the warnings. While we recognise that we were not able to replicate the stress of a potentially life threatening event, the stress-testing definitely improved our confidence that the participant feedback was more suited to the context than if we had not contrived to replicate at least something of the competing demands and change in cognitive processes that characterise a real emergency.

From these groups we were able to identify a common set of words to convey the necessary concepts and levels, as well as getting feedback on the preferred ordering and format of warnings. It was clear that some concepts are inevitably harder than others to convey – in particular trying to describe who and where is affected is very difficult, and vagaries in how

people understand directions, speeds and distances mean that universally understood terms are almost impossible to systematically predetermine.

The output of this first stage was a draft guidebook called *Emergency Warnings: Choosing your words*. This draft was printed and in a controlled manner distributed in hard copy to state and territory contacts.

Testing the Guide with audiences for whom English is not their first language

The context of the research was very clearly warnings to be broadcast in English through the mainstream media. However, it is understood that these messages will also have a role to play for audiences who do not speak English as a first language.

In urban areas there are many people who have a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background, with varying degrees of English proficiency. In regional and remote areas, Indigenous communities also have widely varying use of English – ranging from quite high levels of proficiency through to communities where English is no more than a third or fourth language at best.

While these groups are secondary audiences for the broadcast warnings in English, it is obviously beneficial if they can be structured in such a way as to be maximally effective for these less proficient English speaking audiences as well. Therefore, the next step in the research was to test the draft guide with these audiences and see how well it could be expected to work - and whether there were relatively simple considerations or variations that should be employed to suit these audiences which would not compromise the effectiveness for the larger community.

In 2008 CBSR researchers visited four remote indigenous communities across Qld, NT and WA, in each case spending a couple of days in the communities talking to various groups including councils, community members and any local Government or other service providers who might be important in an emergency. We also consulted with numerous language groups through the mechanism of expert reviewers – Executive Producers who provide language services to SBS Television.

As a result of the feedback from this stage, we revised the guide. It was clear that for people who had a moderate to high proficiency with English, that a simplified version of the Guide would be reasonably effective. Guidelines for simplification were added – reduced choices of words and clear instruction on what simplification meant were added throughout, and an additional section added to the publication.

However, it was also clear that for low proficiency English users alternatives to the mainstream broadcast messages would be necessary, as the format and structure of the warnings needed to be quite different – such that the modified warning's effectiveness in the broader community would likely be reduced.

The final version of *Choosing your words* has now been prepared, and will begin being more widely used. Initial feedback from agencies involved in the National Broadcast of Emergency Warnings Project indicates that this is now one of the resources being used to plan and construct emergency communications including warnings.

Evaluation

In 2009, an evaluation toolkit is being introduced and made available to agencies across the country. This toolkit will comprise a number of components designed to allow agencies to evaluate the processes of issuing emergency warnings. It is intended that this will encourage agencies to evaluate their experiences, promoting learning and improvement. The existence of the toolkit to do this is hoped to generate consistent data that can be aggregated over time, allowing the body of knowledge to expand, and speeding up every agency's learning in this area.

While the evaluation initially focuses on the processes of issuing warnings, it is to be hoped that in time this will expand to cover the content of the messages as well, and this would then allow the *Choosing your words* guide to evolve over time based on accrued feedback from real world uses.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED

What we've learned from this exercise falls into two main categories: what we've learned about emergency communications, and what we've learned about how we do research.

Emergency communications

Before this research there was no information available to assist agencies actually select words to include in emergency communications – and this gap has now been filled. It would be expected that the guide will continue to evolve and be refined, but for the first time there exists a clear indication of language that is considered most suitable and effective to us in these very important situations.

The research clearly showed that these high pressure situations are not a time for getting cute with language. People want clear, intuitive, jargon free language – and this needs to be set to a level that most people are going to understand. Further simplification is possible, but there is a level beyond which an alternative message needs to be constructed in order to retain effectiveness at the community level.

Getting the balance of succinctness and detail is a challenge to which there is no perfect solution. Where supplementary information channels can also be used, then more detail can be conveyed in these other ways and the effectiveness of both improved. However, some warnings need to be constructed with an expectation that they are the *only* information some recipients will get.

It is critical to understand that there is no perfect warning message that will convey 100% of the information to 100% of the people and generate a 100% desired response. There is potential for the message to be interfered with at every step – wording choices, level of detail, receipt, understanding, acceptance, and action. The objective is to *maximise* the effectiveness, and the use of words identified in the research will contribute to this outcome.

It is also important to understand how people respond to communications, how they make decisions, and all the other individual and contextual factors that are at work. These apply in all settings, and don't go away just because it is an emergency – we might cut through some of them, but not all of them. Generating desirable behaviours with warning messages is more difficult than simply getting an understandable warning to people.

One final point is about panic. It was assumed at the outset of the research that avoiding panic was one of the key considerations for writing warnings, but it appears that this is not the case. While people might be stressed and behaving in non-standard ways, actual panic (as opposed to urgent but practical, defensive actions) is unlikely except in certain conditions where it is apparent that people will die and are without any available actions they can take. When writing a warning, it is possible to push the personalisation buttons to generate action fairly hard, as the message is unlikely to cause panic so long as it gives people information and direction.

Research learnings

One of the common criticisms of research is that it does not accurately predict subsequent consumer or public behaviour. If we can't do that, then it is quite legitimate to question the value of research to assist decision making. One of the reasons for this lack of predictability can be that research poorly mimics the ultimate decision making experience. There are often no costs to a research respondent of their indicated choice – but the real world is almost never like that.

In this research we deliberately built into it an attempt to add some of the real world character to the research setting to increase the veracity of our results. It is not a perfect solution, but an improvement. With a little creativity much of the research we do can incorporate these types of elements, hopefully taking us closer to the ultimate goal of predicting the future for our clients.