



Bridging

Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D.

Bridging to key messages is integral to successful interactions with the media. The importance of bridging in media interactions is due in part to:

- (1) the critical role of the media in transmitting and translating risk and crisis information;
- (2) the fact that most people obtain a significant amount of risk and crisis information through the media;
- (3) the critical role the media play in drawing attention to issues, in setting public agendas, in raising public awareness, and in influencing public opinion.

Several factors influence the way the media report the news. Each of these factors accentuates the need for effective bridging to key messages.

- Activities or events that pose the greatest risks to the public do not necessarily receive the greatest amount of media coverage.
- Journalists typically give greater coverage to events that are dramatic and sensational, especially those that cause major disruptions in the routine functioning of society or communities.
- Journalists tend to focus on disputes among experts and authorities in coping with risk situations.
- Journalists often focus more on the politics that surround a risk or crisis situation than to scientific issues.
- Media coverage is strongly influenced by factors associated with newsworthiness and ratings, such as controversy, conflict, disagreements, and wrongdoing.
- Journalists give greater coverage (as measured by frequency, size, and prominence of reports) to incidents with the greatest signal value or threat potential. Characteristics that lead to high signal value or threat potential are generally the same as those that influence public risks perceptions and outrage. These include risks perceived to be unknown, uncertain, unfair, managed by untrustworthy sources, dreaded, potentially catastrophic, memorable, immoral, providing few benefits, not under a person's personal control, involuntary, and unfamiliar. Incidents with these characteristics can be expected to receive much greater coverage than incidents with other characteristics.
- Journalists typically have limited backgrounds in science and math, work under short deadlines, are given limited space or air time to cover complex issues, and are often required to become instant experts.
- Spokespeople only have a limited amount of time to get their key messages across to the media: the average length of a national news media "sound bite" – the amount of time given to any single source of information – is on average 7-9 seconds for television news coverage and 30 words or less for print media coverage.

Several of the most important challenges faced by media spokespeople are (1) to overcome these barriers; (2) to transmit accurate and effective information in a brief, concise, clear, and timely way; (3) to get balanced, fair, and accurate coverage; and (4) to have the media report key messages as close as possible to the way that they were stated. Bridging increases the probability of success in achieving these goals.

One key to a successful bridging is to understand what the reporter needs. The following are questions that should be asked of journalists **before** the interview.

Background Questions

- What is the reporter's name, organization, and telephone number?
- What stories has the reporter previously covered?
- Who generally reads/sees/hears the publication/program?

Logistical Questions

- Where and when will the story appear?
- What is the deadline for the story?
- Where will the interview take place?
- How long will the interview take?
- How long will the story be?
- Does the reporter verify the accuracy of specific quotes attributed to the person being interviewed?

Topical Questions

- What is the theme of the story?
- What specific topics does the reporter want to cover in the interview?
- What types of questions will be asked? Can the reporter provide examples of questions?
- Has the reporter done any background research?
- Will the reporter like to receive background material before the interview?
- Who else has been interviewed? What did they say?
- Who else will be interviewed?

Answers to these questions help determine objectives and key overarching messages. It is these messages that are bridged back to throughout the interview.

Key messages should focus on what you believe the target audience: (1) most needs to know; (2) most wants to know; and (3) is most concerned about.

Bridging transition statements to key messages include:

- “And what's most important to know is...”

- “And what this all means is...”
- “And what’s most important to remember is ...”
- “With this in mind, if we look at the bigger picture...”
- “With this in mind, if we take a look back...”
- “If we take a broader perspective, ...”
- “Let me put all this in perspective by saying...”
- “What all this information tells me is...”
- “Before we continue, let me take a step back and repeat that...”
- “Before we continue, let me emphasize that...”
- “This is an important point because...”
- “And as I said before, ...”
- “And if we take a closer look, we would see...”
- “Let me just add to this that...”
- “Let me point out again that...”
- “Another thing to remember is...”
- “Before we leave the subject, let me add that...”
- “And that reminds me...”

Bridging can also successfully be used in response to specific types of interview questions. One example is the “speculative, what if” question – a hypothetical question that asks about a future state or that begins with “what if.” Another example is the guarantee question -- “Can you guarantee that ...”). Effective answers bridge to facts and to current knowledge. For example, one option for responding to a “speculative, what if” question is: “Instead of talking about what if, it might be better to talk about what is (or about what is known or about what we can predict from the past.) One option for responding to the “guarantee” question is: “You’ve asked me about the future. The best way I know to talk about the future is to talk about the past and present. What we know from the past and present is...”

Bridging provides media spokespeople a means for taking charge of and controlling media interactions. The goal of a media interaction is not just to answer individual questions effectively. It is also to communicate a few key overarching key messages that are accurate, clear, concise, and brief. Bridging allows the spokesperson to answer the reporters’ questions but also focus on the most critical information.