

Tips for spokespersons



How to use this document

This document presents some principles for successful communicators during a crisis.

Following these principles will make it easier for you to ensure transparency through complete, easily understood and accurate communication.

Use the document for spokesperson training and to prepare for an interview or press conference.



How was this document developed?

This document is part of a WHO series of supporting documents concerning events that could erode confidence in vaccination. Such events can be related to vaccine safety, adverse events following immunization, changes in the vaccination programme, negative public debate, outbreaks or pandemics.

All documents were developed based on scientific evidence, laboratory research and fieldwork within psychology, social and behavioural science and communication and lessons learnt in countries. For an introduction to the theoretical background and evidence, refer to the WHO publication *Vaccination and trust*, available here: www.euro.who.int/vaccinetrust.

The supporting documents are intended for use by national

- ministries of health
- centers for disease control
- immunization programmes
- regulatory authority institutions.



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR
Europe

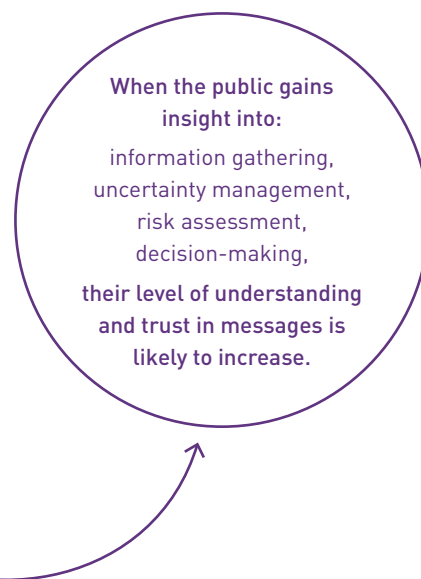
Tips for spokespersons

Trust and transparency

Whenever you engage with the media, the key word is **trust**!

It is not enough to convey the correct information. Only when you gain and maintain the trust of people will you succeed in getting your messages through.

Ensuring the public's trust during a crisis requires **transparency** – i.e. complete, easily understood and accurate communication.



Principles for successful communicators during a crisis

- Be the first to share news — whether good or bad. This allows you to affect how the events are presented before someone else does it. Often, the first source of information becomes the preferred source.
- Provide information on a continuous, frequent basis and reiterate the contact information for updated sources (websites, hotlines, etc.).
- Understand the public's attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, culture and risk perceptions. Prepare messages to address these and try to bridge the gap between the experts and the public.
- Be highly visible.
- Try to make sure that all key stakeholders speak with one voice.
- Avoid attacking the credibility of those with high perceived credibility (such as anti-vaccination lobbyists), even if you do not agree with them. Join hands, as appropriate, with old adversaries.
- Seek, engage and make extensive use of support from credible third parties, such as university experts.

To **READ MORE** refer to:

- *Stakeholder management before and during a vaccine-related crisis*
euro.who.int/vaccinetrust

Tips for spokespersons



Preparing for an interview or press conference

- Find out what medium the interview will be released through (TV, radio, print, online, etc.), the perspective of the media outlet (supportive/non-supportive of vaccination), which subjects will be discussed, who else will be interviewed (ask the journalist beforehand), and whether the interview will be live or pre-recorded.
- o If print or internet you may have extra time to provide data and facts that you are not prepared to give during the interview.
- o If the media outlet has not been favourable towards vaccination in the past, research why and what the issues were before you accept or conduct the interview.
- Clarify to yourself why you are engaging and what your objectives are. Only agree to an interview when you have a clear message to deliver.
- Know the details: Who will be there? What is the chain of events? How long? Etc.
- Check and double-check the accuracy of facts.
- Do scenario planning: identify important stakeholders; anticipate questions and concerns; prepare messages; test messages; anticipate follow-up questions; rehearse responses.
- Choose two or three central messages to focus on during the interview and practice “bridging” to these key messages.
- Be prepared to manage uncertainty. Be frank with the scientific experts that they must be transparent with you, the spokesperson, about what the unknowns are and what most concerns them about these unknowns.

To **READ MORE** refer to:

- *The questions that journalists always ask in a crisis*
 - *How to prepare a message map*
- euro.who.int/vaccinetrust



How you will be perceived during an interview or press conference

- Listen to, acknowledge and mirror the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of others.
- Be respectful and compassionate.
- Provide reassurance – but acknowledge that the situation gives cause for concern and being afraid is a natural reaction.
- Remain calm and in control, even in the face of public fear, anxiety and uncertainty.
- Offer authentic statements and actions that communicate anger, passion, hope, courage and community spirit, such as “I feel deeply with the family of the young girl”.
- Be honest, candid, ethical, frank and open.
- Avoid using humour (jokes, flippancy, irony); if humour seems to be needed, tread carefully.
- Consider your audience, and tailor your actions and messages accordingly.
- Do not try to impress the audience with a superior attitude. Express confidence, not arrogance.
- Show empathy for victims.
- Be particularly sensitive to issues focused on babies, children and pregnant women.
- Remember: The microphone has not always been tuned off when the interview is over; there is never an “off-the-record”.

To **READ MORE** refer to:

- *How to respond to concerns about immunization*
- euro.who.int/vaccinetrust

Tips for spokespersons



What you say during an interview or press conference

- Be accurate, share what you know – this builds credibility and trust.
- Convey your key messages at the opening and repeat at the end.
- Acknowledge uncertainty. Tell them what you know and do not know. Tell them what you are doing to obtain knowledge, what the structures and procedures are, and when you expect to be able to share more information. The public should be prepared for changing recommendations and to seek updated information from trusted sources such as websites, hotline numbers etc.
- Be short, get to the point. Offer concise key messages. Avoid mixed or inconsistent messages (verbal and non-verbal).
- If you are not able to answer a question, be honest. Do not make up a response but do offer to provide follow-up information.
- Be very careful in using negative words such as no, not, never, nothing, none – as people will often focus on negatives when they are under stress and miss the objective of your message.
- Avoid speculating about worst-case scenarios, saying “there are no guarantees”, repeating allegations or accusations, or saying “no comment”. If you refuse to answer a question, explain the reasons.
- Use clear non-technical language free of jargon and acronyms.
- Make extensive use of visual material and anecdotes.
- Be consistent. Repeat key messages again and again.
- Never lie.
- Always answer the question asked and never try to avoid or sidestep an issue. But remember your key messages and bridge to them whenever possible and relevant.

To **READ MORE** refer to:

- *Vaccine safety messages*
- *Strategies used by journalists*
- *Myths and facts about immunization*
- *The questions journalists always ask in a crisis*

euro.who.int/vaccinetrust

Bridging to your key messages

Example of bridging:

Acknowledge the question and answer appropriately

Interview question:

“Talking about pregnant women: Isn’t it true that the new pandemic influenza vaccine will have more side effects than a regular seasonal influenza vaccine because of the rapid development?”

Interview answer:

“Whilst it is true that there are some minor side effects, the outcomes of the studies completed to date suggest that the pandemic influenza vaccine is just as safe and has similar side effects as the seasonal influenza vaccine...”

Bridge to your key messages

...The fact of the matter is that the benefits of this vaccine far outweigh the risks. Pregnant women have an elevated risk for severe illness and have a 10 times higher risk of hospitalization in intensive care units when infected by this new influenza.”