

Media Skills for scientists

Why should scientists communicate through the media ?

Former Science and Technology Writer for The *Australian*, Julian Cribb, suggests the following reasons why scientists should communicate:

- To transfer to society or industry the benefits of research
- To inform policy-makers and leaders about progress that can advance the interests of the community
- To prepare the public for the advent of new technologies and technological change
- To share with industry, other scientists and users the findings of research and experience, so they may be combined into a workable technology
- To bolster economic competitiveness and lower reliance on imported technology solutions
- To remedy and if possible avert environmental damage caused by unwise use of technology and resources
- To involve the next generation in technological progress appropriate to their evolving society.

The only form of communication which reaches every part of society is the general media - and a well-planned communication strategy must take this into account. Politicians and bureaucrats read newspapers and watch television - and often make far-reaching decisions on what they see and hear in the press.

What Australians think of scientists

(R. Bartels, D. Hailstones and M. Shortland, 1993, *Today's Life Science* 5: 12-16)

Physical appearance	Accessories	Personality	Methodology	Lifestyle/income
Bald	Glasses	Dedicated	Facts	Low-income
Old	White coat	Mad	Theory	Isolated
'Nerdy'	Test-tubes	Strange	Experimental	Cheap car
Beard	Calculator	Dry	Logical	Grants
White haired	Chemicals	Boring	Inferences	Middle-class
Bow-tie	Bunsen	Weird	Precision	Quiet
Male	burners	Eccentric	Graphs	Single
Unattractive	Periodic table	Intellectual	Numbers	Suburban
	Specimens	Absent minded	Terminology	
		Clumsy		
		Serious		
		Introverted		
		Hard-working		
		Diligent		
		Pedantic		
		Unorganised		

Understanding the journalist

Exercise: Write down some words in the table below which compare and contrast scientists and journalists.

Scientists	Journalists
Specialists	Generalists
Splitters	Lumpers
Want details	Want broad statements

NB: Insert box with text at the bottom of page five in the blue book.

Lumpers and splitters

The world can be divided into two camps, lumpers and splitters. Lumpers want the big picture. They want summaries, overviews, generalisations, broad implications. Almost all journalists fall into the lumper camp.

Splitters want details. Degrees are important to splitters. Almost by definition, scientists fall into the splitter camp.

A lumper statement might be:

'Scientists invent the crystal ball. They have developed a new computer programme that gives them a glimpse of what our forests will look like in the future.'

A splitter would want to describe the same computer story this way:

'A test version of a linear computer programme available to desk-top computers with 15 K storage capability has been developed that can project the diameter growth of dominant commercial timber species in the inland mountain west. This model does not consider ground cover, nor the effects of changing vegetative conditions resulting from management activities to wildlife or water quality.'

Learn to be a lumper when you talk to journalists!

Start by understanding the journalist, because until you understand the journalist you can't understand the media and make it work for you.

What motivates a journalist? Media bodies (generally) are private enterprise organisations in business to earn money. They get money by attracting viewers/readers, because their advertising rates depend on the number of people who read/watch them. So newspaper editors, and radio and television producers always have as a prime focus the need to generate interesting and important news programmes that people will want to read or watch.

Journalists want to know how your work is going to affect the life of ordinary people. They are interested in the impact it will have on Joe Citizen. Explain yourself to journalists by saying: "I'm working to improve the quality of water in Port Elizabeth by introducing a new way of purifying waste water in wetlands", but not: "I'm investigating transport processes of nutrients in low-salinity wetlands".

Journalists want to please their editors. They want to make the most of your story. The better the story, the bigger the headline, and the more prominent place it will get in the news. And that's good news for the journalist.

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So think of journalists as partners. Help them. Make your story easy to write, easy to film, easy to talk about. Provide supporting written material for print journalists, colourful phrases and succinct colloquial answers for radio journalists, and things that move, look interesting and make noises for television journalists.

Get to know journalists in the media with which you want to work. Read the papers, watch television and listen to the radio to get to know the particular journalists handling your sort of story. Then you can ask for that journalist by name. Journalists love good talent, people with stories and an understanding of how the media works. 'Good talent' makes a journalist's job easy, and media people will return time and again to a person who fits into this category.

Purpose of media skills training

To enable you to exert a greater control over your media appearances by:

- (a) understanding the pressures and constraints under which journalists operate
- (b) tailoring a message to suit the media, without compromising the quality of the message
- (c) gaining experience in media interviews (TV, radio and print)
- (d) knowing how and when to contact different media
- (e) gaining access to communication professionals who can help them
- (f) practising what to do when things become awkward, and answering the difficult question
- (g) other:

Exercise: From the list above, choose the top three things you would like to achieve from this workshop

"Our most urgent and direct message must be to the scientists themselves: learn to communicate with the public, be willing to do so and consider it your duty to do so"

(Royal Society Report on the Public Understanding of Science,, London, 1985)

Controlling the agenda

You can improve the chances of having your story reported accurately. Be clear in your objectives, design a simple message - and rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!

Seven top tips

Objective - have a clear concept of what you want to achieve. Why do you want to use the media?

1. Audience - who do you want to reach? This will determine the best form of the media to use
2. Message - design a clear message which takes into account your objectives and the needs of the audience
3. 'The key bit of paper' - write down the key points you want to get across in a media release
4. Interview - prepare for the interview by thinking of simple, colloquial explanations and by focusing on the main points of your message
5. Preparation - if the media comes to you first then make sure you agree to some time for preparation (this can also include thinking about pictures, digging out some \$ figures and getting any background information together)
6. Rehearsal - practice with your colleagues, your family or your friends.

Don't forget that a communicator or media liaison officer has the skills to help you with all these steps.

Newspapers

Newspapers often need more detail of the story than either television or radio. They can afford to give the story more space.

Most reporters are generalists. They will be reporting a traffic accident in the morning, and local council proceedings in the afternoon. Your life's work might be a 30 minute assignment for them, and one of four stories they do that day. Do not expect them to have any specialist knowledge at all.

Reporters will most likely have a large chunk of the story already, from your release or because you have already talked to them. They will want quotes from you, and will also want to look at the story to put their own special 'angle' on it. That will help them make a connection between what they see as the interests of the reader and the scientific content of the story.

Be direct, Tell them what you think is the main point of the story. Keep the interview focused - don't stray off into speculation of side issues.

Some stories will be a large photo with only a small amount of print. To get your ideas across, you will need simple explanations expressed in the language of your audience. Use colloquial everyday language, and if you can find a simple comparison, so much the better.

Photographers can spend a lot of time getting shots. They like animals and exotic machines, anything that can make a dramatic photo. Help them get a good photo, and in doing so, help promote your story from three paragraphs on page 17, to six paragraphs and a big photo on page three. Remember that good photos can take time to set up, perhaps 40 minutes.

Graphics explaining highly technical processes in a simple way are also very helpful.

Exercise: List 4 ways for controlling the agenda with newspaper stories

Radio

Remember that there are many different sorts of radio interviews you could do: news, current affairs, chat shows, talk back and specialist science programmes. These may be done live to air or as pre-recorded edited material. They may also be done over the phone or in the studio.

Before you give a radio interview, jot down three or four points on paper. They're the things you have identified as important - try to work your answers round to get these points in.

Use homely comparisons, word pictures and simple-language explanations, and have them worked out beforehand. Put a glass of water near the phone or your studio chair.

If you have put out a media release and are expecting calls, make sure that phone lines are clear and that you are available. Don't put out a release on days when you have long meetings - radio is an immediate medium, and if a national programme can't get through to you, the opportunity could be lost.

Have background material ready to fax out to radio journalists who want more information.

Radio likes bright, breezy, shortish answers in colloquial language. Great radio talent paints a visual story with words, and enthusiasm.

Exercise: List 4 ways for controlling the agenda with radio stories

Television

Television is the most powerful and the most demanding form of media. It's hardest to handle, and the most time-consuming to work, but the impact of television is greater than any other form.

When the crew first arrives, the camera-person will get busy collecting as many background and action shots as possible. You need to provide things for videoing. Small furry animals, machines that go whiz and flash are best. Find scientific equipment, protective clothing, strange vehicles, baby animals, anything that is photogenic and related to your work. Small demonstrations work well.

While the camera-person is collecting shots - you can use this time to chat to the reporter. Fill them in on the important aspects, the main thrust of story. And you can also suggest shots to the camera-person.

The reporter will then want to talk to you, the 'talent'. The reporter has the main idea of the story and now needs one or two quotes from you. They're called 'grabs' and they range from 3 to 15 seconds in length. That's all the time you get on camera, so make the most of it.

Exercise: Fill in the table below

	How long is an average TV news story?	How many different shots are there in an average TV news story?	How long does the 'talent' get to talk in an average TV news story?
My guess			
Story 1			
Story 2			

Understand the format of a television news item. An average story runs for 1 minute 20 seconds, and contains 5 to 15 seconds of interview (the "grab") with the "talent". It will contain about 22 different shots.

So you are going to get from 5 to 15 seconds to explain perhaps five year's work. What's the main thing? Which audience are you trying to reach? How do you get to that audience?

Here's an example of a grab: "This cow is bigger, it's beefier, and it's more resistant to diseases. Our organisation has put R10 million into its research, but this cow is going to put R50 million a year back into the beef industry."

Remember that news audiences will not see or hear the question, only your answer. That means - bugger the question, here is the answer I want to give.

One depressing point. You are going to be judged primarily according to your body language, secondly to how you speak, and third - and a long way behind - to what you say. (Psychologists put the figures at 55%, 38%, 7%)

Exercise: List 4 ways for controlling the agenda with television stories

Telling your story

Packaging your information for the media

It's not the quality of the science that counts, but the way you "package" your story that gains media coverage. Use these ideas to express your science in media friendly terms.

- So what. Focus more on the consequences of the event than the event itself. It's the 'so what' factor. For example, talk more about the implications of what you are doing - such as its value to the economy. It's a matter of making the topic relevant to a wide audience.
- Newness. Something that happened yesterday is more newsy than something that happened a week ago. If it is old news you are talking about, dress it up so that you focus on the timeless, non-dateable implication of the event, not the fact that it happened a week or more ago.

- Action. Action says that people are doing something, rather than thinking or expressing opinions.
- Change. Newsworthiness is enhanced if there is a change component in information - evidence that as a result of X, things are not the same any more.
- Conflict. Media like arguments!
- Tangible. The media like to be able to deal with the concrete rather than the abstract. Choose a random example to illustrate your work rather than talk in generalities. Find one tangible example for the cameras to illustrate the general point of your story.
- Proximity. Media will always give precedence to a story with local implications.
- People and organisations. Some people and organisations are more newsworthy than others. For example, you as a representative of a credible organisation can attract more media interest than a private citizen. The science minister may be able to attract more media attention than you.
- Personalise. The media believes that people love to hate to hear about, read about or see other people's suffering, misery, good fortune or misfortune. Stories should be told in people terms.
- Rarity. The more infrequently an incident occurs, the more newsworthy it is. The first in the world or the first in Australia will help to ensure that a story is used.

What is news?

No-one really knows what news is. Experienced people can smell it but they can't describe it. One method to use is the 'cocktail party test'. If people perk up their ears during a cocktail or dinner party explanation of your research, there's a good chance that it's a good news story.

Rutherford Test: Lord Rutherford said: 'if you can't explain your research to the cleaning lady it's not worth doing'.

Exercise: What are the 3 most important points about your story?

The media interview

There are two basic ways that you will deal with the media:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Active | When you prepare a story and take it to the media in your own time |
| Reactive | When the media comes to you. Someone else has made an announcement or an event has happened, and they want a comment. Be wary! |

In all interviews...

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Get your story straight | A single sheet of paper summarising your story forces you to think through the issues and get the names, technical details, and collaborators right |
| 2. Prepare simple explanations | Short words and sentences, and comparisons with familiar processes or objects should be used (eg. 'It works a bit like an egg-beater') |

- | | |
|---|---|
| 3. Think in “R/\$” terms | How much will your research cost? What are the benefits to the country in export dollars? How much will it save the weekly household shopper? |
| 4. Focus on the main points | What are the three main things you want to say? Write them down before the interview. During the interview keep coming back to those points. Any question can be answered: 'Look, the most important thing about this is that...’ |
| 5. When the interviewer arrives or phones | Check through the story with them, make clear what you think the main points are. |

When the media comes to you

- Be cooperative but never do an interview immediately
- Never say 'no comment' (they think you're hiding something)
- Find out what paper or programme the journalist represents. Find out what sort of interview they want (20 second grab or a long interview)
- Find out why they want to do the story. Have they got a media release or some other information from another source? Ask them to fax it across and promise to get back in 20 minutes time, and do so
- Talk to your supervisor, your collaborators and your media liaison officer to work out what you want to say
- Put the message in simple terms, and then get back to the media person
- Say what you have prepared, and then stop - don't be drawn into a conversation.

Sometimes an interviewer will ask you questions you don't want to answer. Here's how to turn the question around:

- The point of the whole issue is simply this..
- Let me answer your question by simply pointing out that in the last...months we have...
- I think that your question is best directed to...but what I can say is...
- To appreciate our position on that issue it is important that you first realise... Let's look at that issue from another viewpoint ...
- Well, that's an interesting point but the key thing I want to say is...

Don't want to answer a particular question?

Always give a reason: 'Look, I can't talk about that because I'm the wrong person...' or '.. because it's commercial in confidence..', or '..because the full results aren't in yet..'

Then add: 'but what I can say is ...' and return to your main message, the message you prepared in advance.

Where does your story fit?

Having gone to the trouble of finding a story and getting everyone involved to agree to publicise it, maximise your exposure. Go for the jugular! Change and shape the release so it fits the various markets - tonight's television news can also be tomorrow's major daily story, and in turn be picked up by radio (which often gets ideas from scanning newspapers), and with a local angle, go in the suburban papers next week. Then there is always the huge *maga~'ne?* market...

Local newspaper

- Main priority: to fill the spaces between ads
- Often they'll run the story exactly the way you write it
- Often they'll run a photograph you provide
- More relaxed because often weekly or bi-weekly deadline

Major daily newspaper / Weekend Papers

- Main priority: quality, entertaining stories
- Competitive - they receive hundreds of faxed releases every day, and run just a few
- Generally will not print a supplied photo (unless it's highly specialised)
- Will not print a media release - will want their reporter to talk to you
- Operate to strict deadlines
- Might have specialist reporter, and hence take a more complex story

Magazines

- Main priority: exclusive stories that don't date
- Magazines like Fair Lady, Sarie, De Kat/Tribute, etc have very high readership and like topics on the environment, health, medicine and women's issues
- Magazines have a long lead time; most of the stories are worked out weeks in advance
- Many magazines employ freelance writers to write feature or profile articles

Radio

- Main priority: talent that can talk interestingly and colourfully
- Radio has a variety of forms: news, special science features, chat shows, current affairs
- Provides an immediate connection between scientist and audience, often with no editing process
- Relies less on substance and more on manner than newspaper
- Quick and easy to do over the phone (sometimes requested to go to studio)

Television

- Main priority: visuals - especially little furry animals or machines with moving parts and flashing lights
- Includes news, current affairs and specialist science programmes
- Most demanding to perform on - you're judged on how you look, then how you sound and only then, on what you say
- Most time-consuming - stories can take 1-3 hours to video and specialist stories can take days
- Very competitive to get on - 15 stories per news bulletin

Message Design

The important thing to remember with message design is RELEVANCE.

The media is interested in how your work will change the lives of their readers and viewers. What's the bottom line? What is your work worth? They are much less interested in the clever science that went into the work.

So be simple and direct in your statements.

You must make your messages relevant to your audience's needs. If you are concerned too much about how 'certain' you are about your information, then you will lose sight of the need to convey relevant information to assist in decision-making.

Scientific rigour is still very important. However, your messages should be able to convey:

- what you currently know to the best of your ability, as well as
- some indication of your level of confidence in this material.

The following three questions offer some guidance for developing the content of messages. It is a good way for achieving project communication objectives while responding to your audience's needs. Messages should be carefully designed for all media efforts, but particularly those that involve sensitive issues.

Three important questions

1. List the three most important items you would like to communicate with this audience
Your objective
2. List the three most important items that this audience wants to learn about your research
Their benefit
3. List the three most likely things the audience could misunderstand or get wrong unless you stress the correct information, and explain any possible misunderstanding
Clarity

Exercise: Message design

The topic: _____

Key audiences: _____

Questions

1. What are the three most important things that the key target audiences want to know about this issue?
2. What are the three most important things you want the target audiences to know/learn about this issue?
3. What are the three things that the target audiences could get wrong unless you stress them?
4. Taking into account your answers to the above questions, what are the three central points of your message?

The Media Release

The successful completion of a media release represents the halfway stage of getting a story out. It forces you think the story through and to choose the parts you want to emphasise to the media.

It also pushes you through a process of discussion with colleagues, collaborating organisations and supervisors, to find agreement on the nature of the story. By the time the media release is finalised, everyone involved is marching to the same drumbeat.

Preparing a media release can be a lot of work, and if a number of partners are involved, can take time. But a good one has a lot of value - it helps you sort out your mind.

Media releases are best left to the experts, because they know the style and conventions of such a highly specialised piece of writing. The role of the scientist is to contribute the ideas, advise on the emphasis, and approve the final version with the right of veto.

The art of writing a release lies in finding the hook, the angle for the story. Why is the story going to be of interest to the media? Quite often what you think is the point and what the media thinks is the point are different things.

Got your story? Now work out how it will be of interest to media - use the 'so what?' guide: how is it going to affect the person in the street?

Your release will be just one of as many as 500 to hit the desk of the News Editor that day. It has less than a second to impress itself on this person.

Writing the release

1. It has to be bright to catch attention, direct to say what the story is about in the first paragraph, simple so that they can understand it, and it must promise a good story - with a bonus of good pictures. You need a catchy headline.
2. The purpose of the release is similar to that of a red flag waving down a train - once you have the driver's attention, then you can tell the full story. It is not a scientific paper. Use a picture/diagram/map if that suits the story.
3. Media stories don't fit the beginning-middle-end pattern, they're inverted pyramids. Most important parts come first, subsequent material fills in details in descending order of importance. A newspaper story can have paragraphs snipped off the bottom and still make sense. Your media release should follow the same pattern.
4. Releases have to be written in the language of the audience - about 12 year old reading skills. Pretend you are telling it to your mother, or Rutherford's cleaner. Use short sentences, short paragraphs, short and simple words, and colourful comparisons with everyday life.
5. Where possible, put in costs or benefits in rand (money) figures.
6. Include very clear information on date, time, place, contact numbers, and maps if necessary. Contact persons must be just that - very easily contactable.
7. Write "Media Release" at the top.
8. Use the experts - your media liaison officer should be able to do the hard work.

Timing the issue of a release

Early in the week is probably best. It tends to be a quiet news time. Weekends can also be good - that's why politicians tend to put out releases on Sunday for TV that night, and Monday's paper.

The best time to arrange a media event/announcement/ is mid morning to mid afternoon. The worst time is Friday afternoon - too close to deadlines, too much competition on space as Friday is a big news day. Mid-morning can be the best times to reach journalists (although this depends on the deadlines in that form of media).

Embargo

You can place an embargo on a story, a request to the media not to use the story before a certain time, say midnight Sunday. These requests are almost always honoured. Get advice on specific embargoes from your media liaison relations officer.

Embargoes mean that no media outlet can use a story before a specified time. Because you issue it in advance, the journalists can think about it (an advantage if it contains complicated information) and plan their coverage.

Distribution

This will normally be handled by your media liaison officer. The basic principle is to scatter releases freely to anyone you think will give the story a run, paying particular attention to journalists who have covered similar stories in the past. Your media liaison officer should follow up the faxed release with a phone call, to fix the event firmly in the media mind.

Advantages of a media release

- It saves time for you and the reporter
- It helps reporters get the details right
- It is a source of quotes, and may be used word for word by smaller papers
- It forces you, your colleagues, your collaborators, your supervisor and your media liaison officer to think through what you want to say, to condense it, and to check you are all saying the same thing
- You can clear it with your organisation and collaborating organisations
- You have a copy of what was issued
- It enables you to reach a number of media outlets at the same time

The media event

You have initiated a story through your media liaison officer by issuing a release. After the release has gone, and on the day before the announcement, ring the media (or better still, get your media liaison officer onto the job) to boost the story, and to remind them. Have subsidiary material for details, and offer to fax it out to people. Make sure the media know where to go - send them a map.

Time your announcement or demonstration for late morning to early afternoon to fit in with media deadlines. Try to avoid lunch times - other events happen then.

Be reliable, on time, available, ready, willing, obliging, pleasant - but don't expect the same from the media. They can be late, sloppy and unreliable, and often will. Don't panic. Put plenty of time aside. Media work can be very time-consuming. Remember the definition of war - 90% boredom, 10% terror. It probably fits media work too.

The first thing to do is to prepare a media release, a specialist task best left to your media liaison officer. The release outlines the effect of your work, and says that at a specified time and place, you will demonstrate your work for the media and answer their questions.

Choose a place easy to find, easy to get to and which offers interesting things at which cameras can be pointed. Get there early. Rehearse what you want to do, and have your one-liners, your plain-language explanations prepared.

Have the media liaison officer there too, with printed back-up material and spare media releases. It's easy to be swamped, and good to have an *off-sider*? who can direct traffic, help journalists, chase cows. Have clear phone lines through to you, and make sure the media have the number.

Get your media liaison officer to borrow a mobile phone if you're doing an announcement in the field, so you can be contacted on the spot. Journalists will want to check times and places, and radio journalists want interviews.

Make sure you have your photographic props, especially for TV. Things which make noises, move, flashing lights, or small and furry animals are much better than talking heads.

Media people will straggle in from other jobs. About the appointed time, your media liaison officer should introduce the scientist, who in five minutes explains simply and directly the impact of the work and something of the process. At the end, make it clear that you are available for photographs and interviews.

This is when their real work begins. Journalists have their background material, and now they want a more individual and personal angle. Television crews want their 10 second grabs, and newspaper photographers need a photograph. If there are a number of journalists there, it becomes a media merry-go-round, with each journalist grabbing the scientist in turn, and the scientist answering the same questions repeatedly.

Allow about an hour and a quarter for the whole event.

Media event checklist

It is a good idea to plan a media event well in advance. Media events can be organised very quickly but early planning avoids many potential problems. If you have access to a media liaison officer, they should be doing most of the work in organising such an event.

Initially - Three to four weeks before the event

- Story identified - why do you want to publicise it?
- Agreement by all involved that a media event is desirable, and of the nature of the event
- Identify spokesperson
- Date and time chosen (early in week, in morning best)
- Media identified - local/national, radio/TV/newspaper/all
- Media liaison officer talks to participants and writes draft release
- Contact magazines, trade journals, specialist TV shows which have longer lead times

Two weeks before the event

- Media release approved by all involved, and approaching final version [] Identify and arrange picture opportunities, demonstrations, etc.

In week before event

- Progressive issue of media release, on embargoed basis
- Book cars, equipment, mobile phones; inform local receptionist of event [] Rehearse events of day

Two days before event

- General issue of media release, on an embargoed basis
- Follow-up the media release with phone calls (to major journalists) [] Check equipment needed for day, including mobile phone

The day of the event

- Ring television stations to see they got release, 'sell' story
- Get to site 90 minutes beforehand, check any directional signs, equipment, final rehearsal

Post event

- Be prepared for follow-up radio interviews
- Evaluation and post-mortem

Exercise: Planning a Media Event

The Topic: _____

Planners: _____

Questions

1. What action will be the central feature of your event? (describe the event)
2. Who will be the main spokesperson?
3. When and where will the event occur?
4. What is the main 'angle' of your event?
5. Write the media release HEADLINE advertising the event to the media

When things become awkward

Almost all scientific stories are 'good news' stories - announcements or releases issued on behalf of scientists and accepted by an uncritical media. The timing is determined by the scientist, and so is the whole agenda.

'Bad news' stories about difficult or contentious subjects should be planned and released in the same way as 'good news' stories. Draft a media release, discuss it with the other people concerned, nominate a spokesperson, work out what the main message is, put it in simple terms, anticipate the questions, rehearse and organise an interview or event. Just take extra care with all these steps.

This is a time when you have to be careful what you say, and how you say it. Learn to control the agenda, so your message gets out - and not the journalist's ideas or preconceptions.

Work out what you want to say, and keep saying it - pleasantly, patiently, firmly:

Question: Is the water in the Emerald district being poisoned by crop dusting?

Answer: The water in the Emerald Dam is tested every month for chemical pollution, and the tests show that the water is perfectly safe. The traces of chemicals in the water are well inside all recognised health levels.'

Questions: 'But two cases of leukaemia have been reported in the district over the last three months.'

Answer: "The water in the Emerald Dam is tested regularly and is absolutely no threat to public health whatsoever etc.'

Question: 'Local residents report seeing a crop duster discharging spray into the dam itself. Isn't this going to contaminate the water?'

Answer: 'Our tests cover every sort of chemical used in the weed eradication program, and the levels of these chemicals in the water supply is very low, far below dangerous levels. The water in the Dam is perfectly safe...etc.'

Never say 'no comment'. Any reasonable person takes that as an admission of guilt. Say instead: 'I can't answer that question because (give a reason eg. the research has not been completed), but what I can say is...(now say your main message)..'

When you have finished, stop. Don't be embarrassed into filling a silence, don't keep talking just to keep a good conversation going.

An organisation working in potentially sensitive areas can prepare itself for potentially hostile media. First, appoint one person at the site or in the organisation to be spokesperson. All media enquiries are to be channelled through that person, which means the media hears one consistent voice.

Second, play the 'what-if' game, and try to anticipate all likely nasty questions and the most dreadful possible events, and work out how you would handle them. Anticipation and practice make a big difference.

Third, don't wait for the media to come to you - you go to the media first, with some good-news stories. Build up a relationship, and valuable media experience. When tests of the Emerald Dam water come back looking good, celebrate by inviting the media in. Drink the water, show them your testing process, explain the limits the Health Department has set, show them fish swimming in the Dam.

This contact will help you on later occasions. Media will know who you are, where to go, and the background of the testing processes. They will have photos and footage on file, and this will help them to run a fuller, more balanced story on subsequent occasions.

It will give you credibility when you offer to check the copy through for them for scientific accuracy.

HOT TIPS

1. Communicate to share your discoveries, bolster your chances of funding, and prepare society for change
2. 'If you can't explain your research to the cleaning lady, it's not worth doing.'
(Rutherford)
3. Eighty-five per cent of scientists report positive experiences of media contacts
4. If you have a story running, you must be easy to contact

5. Journalists kill for good stories - give them clear facts, good picture opportunities and plenty of time before deadlines, and they'll love you
6. Journalists are not the enemy - they need good stories to keep their jobs, and if you can help them, they'll be pathetically grateful
7. Be deadline conscious
8. News is about the CONSEQUENCES of your story, not about the science - how does it affect the ordinary person?
9. New news is good news, old news is no news (unless you can dress it up)
10. News is not like a scientific paper - it leaves out all the qualifiers and exceptions, and talks about the main effects of your research
11. Think of the reporter as an opportunity, not a threat
12. Use your media liaison officer or a freelance journalist to help you
13. The media want to talk to the scientist doing the work, not a spokesperson
14. During interviews, don't lose your cool with the journalist
15. Stick to the point - make your points briefly, quickly, clearly, then stop
16. When you have finished, be pleasant and friendly - check to see if they have what they need, and don't forget that anything you say may be used
17. On TV and radio try to be yourself
18. Radio, television and newspaper journalists all have their media priorities - get to know the differences, and play to their strengths
19. Offer to view the copy for scientific accuracy - but never try to change the journalist's angle
20. Media loves 'good talent' with a brief and definite story to tell in a dramatic manner
21. Look only at the interviewer while you're on camera
22. Show enthusiasm for your story - it's infectious
23. Don't wear sunglasses on TV - you'll look like a crook
24. Rehearse the simple explanations of your work
25. Say it quickly and brightly in your media release - media outlets get hundreds of releases every day, and each gets just a scan
26. Make the most of your media release - don't just use it for one newspaper or one form of media

27. Don't put out a media release unless you have something to say
29. A good media release is a baited hook, set for the big catch
30. If your story gets mangled by the media or if it doesn't get in, try to find out what went wrong - it might have been your fault, or it might lead to a useful contact for the future
31. Today's newspaper is tomorrow's fish and chips wrapper

Help from professional communicators

The key value of communication specialists lies in their ability to help scientists package and deliver planned media stories. A good science communicator or media liaison officer is the best person to:

- help you identify a story
- plan how the story is to be released
- produce clear media releases and briefing material
- plan a media 'event', including picture opportunities
- help you practice interview techniques
- look after the media at media events
- contact journalists personally
- distribute media releases
- keep press clippings and records of media interviews
- evaluate the success of media strategies

If you have a story to get out, talk to your media liaison officer well in advance of the planned date.