Facts, Problematic Statements, and Communication

Peter Holte,
City of Redmond Stewardship Coordinator
&
Stormwater Outreach for Regional Municipalities (STORM)

Language is a virus from outer space. –William S. Burroughs

No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong. –Albert Einstein

Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. –Daniel Moynihan

How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four; calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg. –Abraham Lincoln

Purpose

This presentation:

-- Provides thoughts on the importance of fact checking information

-- Provides assistance to EcoNet groups creating messages about their Action Areas

-- Should be useful to organizations that work on controversial issues

The Following Presentation:

1) Examines the goal—what's a good statement
2) Discuss the importance of fact checking
3) Briefly describes the Puget Sound Starts Here Campaign
4) Describes the Puget Sound Starts Here campaign vetted process:
   --Determined our needs and gathered facts
   --Fact checked statements
   --Communicated statements
   --Documented sources, assumptions, & processes

What is a good statement?

It is correct. It is valid.

It serves its purpose:

--Opens conversation

--Closes conversation

--Supports a larger messages

--Provides protection—disarms adversaries

Memorable and relevant to the audience.

--Understandable

--Short

Why is it important to be factually correct?

Maintain validity and creditability

Adversaries are looking for opportunities

Legal reasons

Ethical reasons

Example where inaccuracy hurt

Glaciers and the IPCCA mistaken claim about glaciers raises questions about the UN's climate panel

-- January 21, 2010 | *The Economist*

The report transposed two numbers: the correct number --2350--became 2035

2350 refers to the year in which glaciers in the Himalayas will disappear

Example of vetting done right

More than 177,000 dogs live in Snohomish County, producing waste equivalent to a city of 45,000 people. More than 29 tons of dog waste are dropped in Snohomish County backyards *every day*!

--Snohomish County Surface Water Management Program

Puget Sound Dog Waste

Pounds per day

Island	8,099
Jefferson	3,477
King	173,158
Kitsap	21,940
Mason	6,385
Pierce	68,233
San Juan	2,426
Skagit	10,388
Snohomish	58,504
Thurston	21,960
Whatcom	18,579
Puget Sound	**393,150**

Puget Sound Dog Waste

Human equivalent

Island	6,319
Jefferson	2,713
King	135,098
Kitsap	17,118
Mason	4,981
Pierce	53,235
San Juan	1,893
Skagit	8,105
Snohomish	45,645
Thurston	17,133
Whatcom	14,495
Puget Sound	**306,734 people**

Why was Snohomish County successful?

They did their homework—researched the topic

They documented their assumptions and process

They researched how people react to this information

Result: When the reporters called ready to pounce, Snohomish County was ready!

Puget Sound Starts Here

A Challenge

Millions of lbs of toxic material to the Sound every year:

--75% comes from stormwater

--residential areas largest contributor[1]

50% of Puget Sound residents do not understand where storm drains flow[2]

45% of residents think our streams, rivers, and lakes--and 56% think Puget Sound--are in excellent or good shape[3]

More About the Challenge

We want to pass on something of value to future generations

Puget Sound Area’s Population is going to increase

Our previous outreach methods did not seem to be working…

PSSH attempts to meet this challenge by:

-- Combining, science, social science, and market researching principles

-- Offering consistent regional messages and a regional common brand (logo)

-- Making an emotional appeal to a targeted audience

-- Using Factual information to support the emotional appeal

Using Factual Statements in PSSH

Identified needs--the campaign needed statements that:

--Support an emotional appeal

--Illustrate both the plight & worth of Puget Sound and our local lakes, rivers, & streams

Gathered quotes that met these needs

Decided that all facts should be based on best available science (BAS)

Creating Factual Statements for PSSH

Three steps:

-- Fact check (vet) the statement and facts

-- Determine how to communicate them

-- Document what we did

Vetting

Intuition is an important starting place

Book recommendation: *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell

We gave the fact, statement, quote, etc. the "sniff-test" and the "straight-face test"

Vetting

Searched for sources to verify the statements:

-- Peer reviewed journal articles

-- Personal contacts

--Who are we attributing the statement to?

--Tried to contact this person or group

-- Group wisdom from experts and colleagues

--”Does this look right?”

-- Newspaper articles, other sources of information

--Be careful…

Examples of where things *could* have gone wrong; two widely used incorrect statements

Every two years, the amount of oil released into Puget Sound is the equivalent of the Exxon Valdez spill.

Orca Whales are so toxic that dead whale carcasses had to be taken to a hazardous materials facility for proper disposal.

Communicating

Recognizing the type of information gathered and how it was created

Considering the audience

Testing

--does not need to be super fancy

--use common sense & neighbors, friends, co-workers, baristas, hairdressers…

Communicating

Determining the type of information:

--Peer reviewed scientific information

--Grey literature from a public organization

--Information from a modeling exercise

--The ‘educated guess’ of a group of experts

--Newspapers, blogs, or other media

The type of information may provide keys on how to use it.

Peer reviewed articles usually have a finding, “The researchers found…”

Modeling is an estimate, “It is estimated that…”

Groups of experts have opinions, “Many stream water quality monitoring specialists believe…”

Newspaper reports, “The Times reports that…”

Communicating

Speak people-talk!

Water Words that Work:

http://waterwordsthatwork.com/the-method/words/

Market research conducted by:

Snohomish County, Redmond, Bellevue, Shoreline, Kitsap County, Thurston County, and others

Ask people unfamiliar with the issues what they think about the statement and its wording

Communicating

Stickiness—a marketing term for how well a fact, brand, saying, image, etc. stays with the audience

Book recommendation: *What Sticks: Why Most Advertising Fails and How to Guarantee Yours Succeeds* by Rex Briggs & Greg Steward

Urban myths tend to be very sticky & hard to "unstick"

Sometimes what I would consider as an important fact is not very sticky

Documenting

We created these documents:

Puget Sound Starts Here
Vetted Statements from Recent Findings
(Revised 1/28/10)

White Papers, for example:
Car Care: Residential Car Washing On Paved Areas
(Defining the Problem**)**
(Prevalence**)**

Problematic Statements
(Revised 1/28/10)

Documenting

Best available science (BAS) will change, and when it does you may need to alter your statements

--Be conservative & express facts and figures conservatively

If you use an assumption, explain how you constructed that assumption and how you used it

When BAS does change:

-- It does not mean that past information was incorrect

-- It was the best information available at that time

-- Only small number may notice, but some in this group might want to derail your efforts

-- Using BAS simply means “We are providing the best information available”

-- As such, BAS offers the high ground—it is defensible

The Great Statement

Factual, based on best available science

Meets its purpose and fulfills needs

Is relevant and memorable to the audience

Sometimes you have to kill the statements you like the best.

There is good, factual, & persuasive information out there.