

Email from a BU Public Health expert, August 22, 2020 (reprinted with permission)

The importance of clear, up-to-date, and accurate information is essential during an outbreak or pandemic, and there is a good body of public health scholarship on precisely this issue. Two other elements that are critical are honesty and transparency. It is critical for the messengers to build trust with the audience, and when honesty or even just transparency is lacking, it undermines that trust, which leads to much less effective communications. At a national level, I am convinced that this has played a huge role in the lower rates of compliance than one would have expected given the circumstances.

At any rate, as far as sources, to start there is the CDC's guidelines on public communication during an outbreak: <https://www.cdc.gov/eis/field-epi-manual/chapters/Communicating-Investigation.html>. It includes a nice "Do's and Don'ts" table (12.1), and it looks like the University has almost uniformly been following the Don'ts.

CDC also has an emergency communication guidebook (https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC_Messages_and_Audiences.pdf). Of particular interest are the sections on credibility and trust on pages 7 and 8. For example:

Your message delivery can make or break your credibility. This will affect how audiences react to your initial message and all communications that follow. **Two influencers of credibility are the speed of release and the accuracy of information.** **Speed of Release:** As soon as lifesaving information is confirmed, it should be released. Even if you do not have all of the details, do not wait to share the information that you do know that can save lives or prevent injury. The speed of a message also indicates how prepared your organization is to respond. If you do not communicate about your response, as far as the public knows, you are not responding. Accuracy of Information: People will depend on your organization for accurate information about the emergency and what they can do to stay safe or help respond. Therefore, you should ■Get the facts right. Before releasing messages, validate them with subject matter experts and people familiar with the incident. ■If facts change based on new information, you should quickly update information and coordinate messaging changes with other organizations. ■Repeat facts and action items often, using simple, easy-to-understand language. ■State what you know, what you don't know, and what you are doing to find out more. Do not speculate. ■Ensure that all communications from your organization and its partners share the same facts. Inconsistent messages increase anxiety and quickly undermine expert advice and credibility. »In reality, you cannot control what another organization says. By fully and clearly explaining your messages and their reasoning, your audiences will be less likely to doubt you. ■Competence and experience lend themselves to accuracy. Spokespersons should hold high positions and have education demonstrating subject matter expertise. For example, a doctor could appear in the front of your audience on behalf of your organization in an infectious disease response.

Here are the World Health Organization guidelines, which start with "Trust": <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259807/9789241550208-eng.pdf;jsessionid=DC92B6F56B745D54B4AED56A509A54C4?sequence=2>

Finally, perhaps the best individual research articles are this collection published in 2008 in Health Promotion Practice: https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.bu.edu/toc/hppa/9/4_suppl.