

Oil Spills and the Pandemic: Shared Lessons for Risk Communications

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Extended Abstract

It is striking how many parallels can be drawn between the Covid-19 health crisis and an oil spill response. They are both emergency response situations that can have impacts lasting months or years. In both cases we see a situation where a bad thing has already occurred and the task at hand is to mitigate the unfortunate consequences for the optimal outcome. There may be several options and decisions to make to limit the damage, and a need for these options to be considered objectively, based on science rather than driven by emotion. In the oil spill response community this process is known as Spill Impact Mitigation Assessment (SIMA).

The SIMA discussion may require the debunking of myths and unfounded perceptions about different response techniques. Any detrimental effects to the economy or the environment need to be balanced against the impact mitigation supported by case history evidence and unambiguous science. The SIMA output provides a semi-quantitative output to support the decision-making process however the challenge remains to communicate the output in clear, concise, and objective ways that stakeholders can access and understand.

Explaining a Technical Problem

A response option frequently discussed in SIMA is dispersants. The use of dispersant is a response option that utilises surfactants and solvents to increase the rate of natural dispersion and dilution into the water column. Unlike other response options, dispersant doesn't remove oil from the marine environment. For this reason, it can be challenging to effectively communicate the benefits of the technique, especially when responding to larger oil spills at sea.

We have seen this challenge during past responses, such as the Macondo incident in the Gulf of Mexico, 2010. Similarly, in the Covid-19 crisis, we saw how difficult it could be for politicians and “experts” to explain the rapidly unfolding situation and potential future outcomes to a population who were frightened, sceptical or both.

Presenting science clearly

Throughout the pandemic, we have become familiar with a raft of respected experts who use visual models, graphs and charts to explain the dynamics of the situation and projections under a range of scenarios. Painting a picture with words requires skill and in England, the government’s Deputy Chief Medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam is an acknowledged master of the technique. His metaphors and football analogies struck a chord with an anxious population and confirmed his cult status as the most trusted face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Short, often repeated videos with a memorable message have been a critical engagement tool, particularly in reaching the younger generation¹ who may not access traditional mainstream broadcast news media. In addition, these videos are shared across social media platforms and help engage an audience that were previously hard to reach.

Social media can also be a breeding ground for misinformation, mistrust, or contempt. An emotive situation (e.g. Covid 19 or an oil spill) can easily polarise opinions and the algorithms that drive these platforms enable those seeking an alternative narrative to find who and what they are looking for, no matter how credible (or not) such views may be. Nevertheless, its ever more important to make use of the engagement opportunity that social media provides. If you don’t manage this space, it will manage you! The sceptics will seek to undermine the mainstream narrative in any case but stakeholder engagement through these platforms is also a powerful tool, which similarly needs to find a place to be heard.

Applying industry lessons

Following the Macondo incident the oil industry hired a team of communication experts to help engage stakeholders (including regulators) on the techniques of spill response which were proving hard to explain.

¹ <https://www.targetinternet.com/how-different-age-groups-are-using-social-media/>

People needed to understand why adding dispersant to an oil spill can ultimately benefit sensitive resources. The outputs became known as “scan/glance”; a series of stylised PowerPoint™ presentation files that employ a very neutral colour palette, plain, capitalised text, and simple iconography to convey key technical concepts factually and concisely

The slide decks are entirely unbranded and designed to speak "for and on behalf of industry". In addition, they are freely available to be used in conversations with stakeholders who need to know in simple terms what ingredients are in dispersant, how they work, and the consequences of **not** using all the available tools in the responder's toolbox.

The team further developed a range of other documentation to support these high level -low detail outputs. Good practice guides, technical reports and “deep-dive” study documents provided the essential underpinning needed to give the scan/glance materials the credibility and authority required.

Furthermore, the team delivered a concerted roll-out program to promote the suite of materials to around 500 responders worldwide. This programme inspired a ripple effect of "confident ambassadors", trusted advocates of the industry mantra on oil spill preparedness and response.

Learning from the pandemic

Experiencing the response to the pandemic as UK citizens reinforced several truisms that many oil spill responders already know:

- In an oil spill, as in a pandemic, speed of decision-making and subsequent action is a critical success factor
- Stakeholder engagement (through a wide variety of media) is essential throughout:
 - There can be a need to convince stakeholders (the public) that by injecting a blend of scientifically endorsed products, it will somehow make the situation better
 - Despite best efforts to use social media for positive stakeholder engagement, this space abounds with conspiracy theorists opposed to the presented scientific consensus

- There are inevitably trade-offs that need careful explanation, but it is essential to build consensus and communicate them openly and faithfully.

In risk communications, whether it is an oil spill or a global pandemic there are many parallels to the situation that governments and industry can learn from each other's past experiences. In either case, it's essential to apply the KISS (Keep-It-Simple, Stupid) principle. Consistent, trustworthy communication clearly presented and at different levels of detail to suit the audience must remain the goal that we all strive for whenever an incident or crisis happens.