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# Catastrophe Communications

A strategic handbook

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# Empowering people to help them help themselves



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## Strategic Catastrophe Communications

***Catastrophe communicators must be strong informational gatekeepers, focusing on the timeliest, most actionable information that breaks through the paralyzing noise of chaos.***

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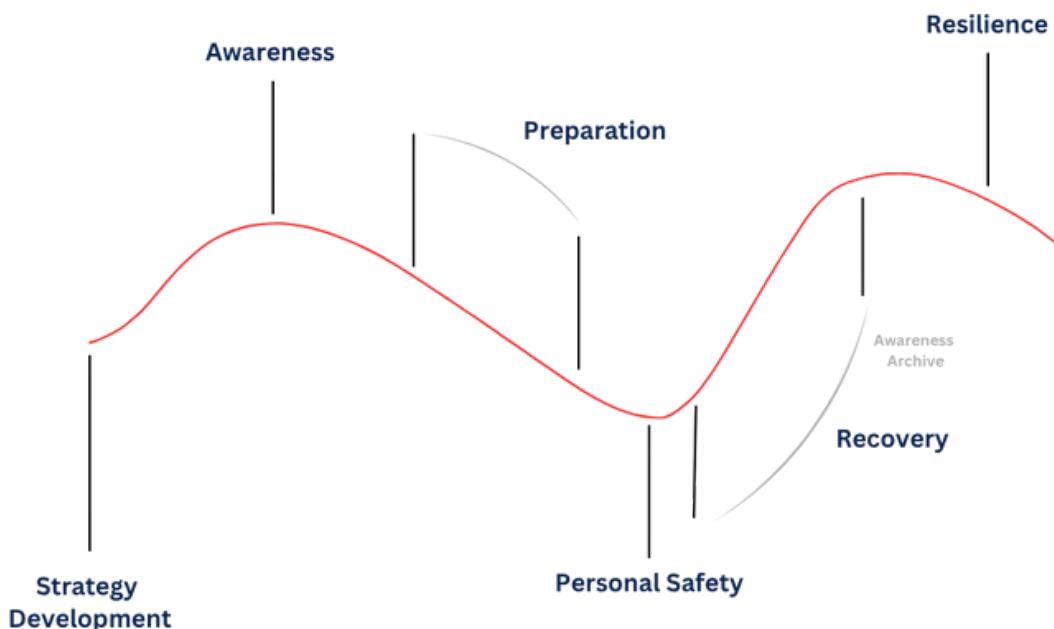
In times of disaster, there is often a focus on connectivity, the physical infrastructure of communication. Strategic Catastrophe Communication addresses the message, the mechanism through which critical information and instructions are disseminated to the public. It is a unique discipline with a perennial lifecycle affixed to an uncertain target date.

Catastrophe communicators are seeking to empower people with information to help them help themselves. Strategic catastrophe communications are environmental. That environment is uniquely difficult and filled with distractions, both physical and subconscious. Understanding and having experienced the complexities of this environment is essential for effectively communicating before or during a disaster.

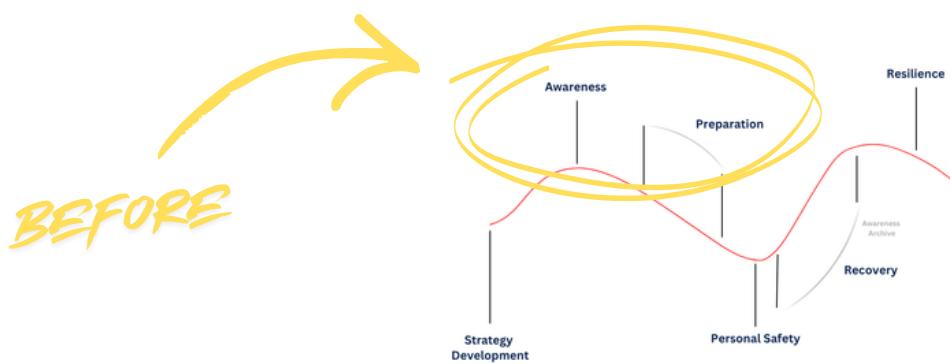
Timely, actionable, and meaningful proactivity is key. How and when you interact with each stakeholder group depends on understanding the catastrophe communication lifecycle.

# Catastrophe Communications Curve

As you get closer to an event, your message tightens to focus your audience on immediacy. **Pinnacle's Catastrophe Communication Curve** illustrates the lifecycle of emergency management communications. Depending on the nature and frequency of a peril, your outreach may pick up at different points of the curve. Inclusive strategy development is important.



The curve is cyclical. The transition from one phase to another is as seamless as possible, particularly in relation to event seasons. Resilience communications blend back to awareness to make possible a continual promotion of readiness.



PC  
Catastrophe Communication Curve

The time before a disaster is critical. It is, however, difficult getting people to listen to your message when the threat is not imminent, motivating them to act when the reward is not immediate. This is why creativity is essential when crafting and delivering catastrophe communications.

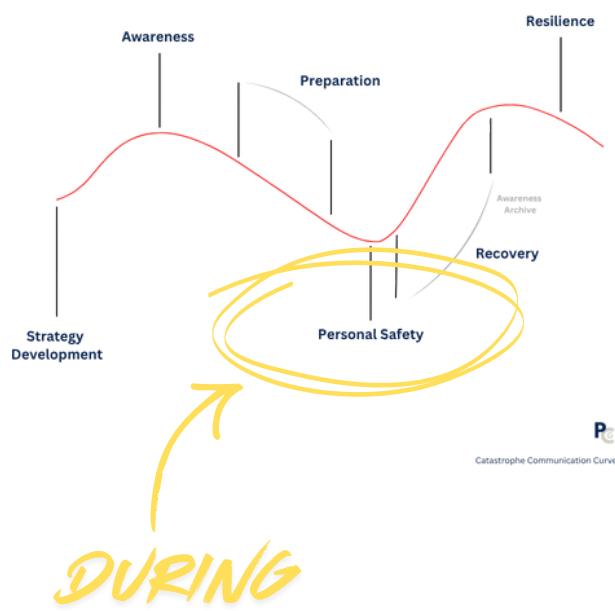
The **awareness** stage of the catastrophe communications curve is open-ended. Awareness campaigns take place independent of a specific season or developing event. They are intended to maintain consciousness of perils without specific reference to an incident. Often, awareness stories are archived ideas or revisited narratives from past recoveries.

The key to effective **preparation** communication is crafting a compelling message that grabs attention and encourages action without diminishing its importance. This requires the ability to combine visual, editorial, and individually impactful elements of the story to create a meaningful message that drives action.

Awareness and preparedness campaigns share many strategic characteristics. The difference is that preparedness messaging is triggered by, in the case of predictable perils, the impending event. In most cases, however, where preparedness messaging is seasonally based and focuses more directly on specific actions to get ready.

Communications during an event focus on **personal safety**. In many cases, communication during an event is not possible due to the limited duration of a minimally predictable occurrence. In these cases, matters of public/personal safety are incorporated into recovery communications, as significant hazards can still exist.

In the case of wildfires, hurricanes, volcanic activity, and certain humanitarian incidents like civil unrest, where the timeframe of an unfolding incident is longer, the public safety component is more important.



During an unfolding disaster, critical public safety information must be clear, honest, and actionable. Concentrate on key information like immediate protective necessities.

In this stage, the time for preparedness is past. Premature recovery messaging can be distracting.

Emergency management, first responder, and charitable/humanitarian organization communication should all focus on emergency instructions and the importance of following the direction of public safety officials.

The effectiveness of preparedness campaigns significantly impacts recovery communication strategy. The more prepared an individual or community is, the more ready they are for recovery. Recovery messages have clear immediacy. They are, however, hampered by life-changing and life-threatening distractions.



Recovery communications focus on returns to normalcy. In both preparation and recovery cycles, as possible, dedicate specific spokespeople for each medium. This allows for greater proactivity. Be human, communicate with compassion, staying aware of the emotional impact of the incident. Be honest about risks and uncertainties.

Recovery flows into resilience. Resilience communication emphasizes long-term adaptability, strengthening community programming, and maintaining system functionality during and after a crisis. Preparedness ensures readiness for a specific event, whereas resilience enables endurance; it is an opportunity for public and private organizations to promote broader socio-political goals at a time when the need is fresh.

# Pinnacle Communications Group

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**Bill Mellander**

## **Bill Mellander, Pinnacle Communications Group Managing Strategist and Chief Storyteller**

Bill is an innovative leader and adept strategic storyteller. For twenty-five years, he has helped organizations identify and leverage their narratives. His strategic storytelling architecture identifies meaningful, actionable, and timely opportunities that are the foundation for powerful calls to action.

Bill's background is diverse. A Fortune 50 communications leader working with public and private sector partners. He began his career as a television journalist. Bill left television and became a hurricane chaser as the National Catastrophe Media Relations Manager for Allstate Insurance Company, recognized nationally as an expert in catastrophe communication management. He has since worked with organizations in eleven countries to implement frameworks for strategic storytelling.

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