

Deepening Your Relationship With Your Community



Understanding Your Audiences

Get To Know Your Service Area

What you say, how you say it, when you say it, and where you say it all depends on who you are saying it to because though these are all people who matter to you, they are very diverse. Your service area has people of all ages. It has men, women, and non-binary people. It is likely to have people all along the education, income, and political spectrums. Your service area is likely to have people from a mix of ethnicities, races, and religions. These differences in the people you serve mean they are likely to experience the world differently. They are likely to have different perspectives about government, government services like water, and the safety of tap water. They are likely to access information differently and trust different sources. To reach them all effectively, you need to understand who they are, where they are, what they're thinking, and how they prefer to receive information so that you can deliver the right message, at the right time, through the right channel.

Questions to consider

- Do all these people have access to the internet and email?
- Are they all on social media? Which platforms do you think they are on? Why?
- Do they all receive a bill (and therefore, do you have their cell phone, mailing, or email address)?
- Where do you think they get local news? Why?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, it's important that you spend time studying your service area and who is in it until you can answer them. That way, you'll have better success truly reaching them. Pay very close attention to the fact that not everyone who uses your water is a customer. Consider renters and employees of business customers that commute from other communities. They are part of your service area, and part of your audience, even though they don't receive a bill.

Some ways to identify who is in your service area include

- Brainstorm with your colleagues (include a mix of ages, races, and years lived in the area). The key is to assemble a group that represents the demographics of your service area
- Have a conversation with your local economic development office and/or look up any information they have, as they generally know who lives in the area
- Talk to your elected officials to get their sense of it
- Review the U.S. Census, County Health Rankings, or City Health Dashboard

Ensuring Your Communication is Accessible To All

Keep the Writing Simple

The right message to the right people means ensuring what you write and say is fully understood by the audience, and that they have intellectual access to your meaning. It's been reported that most American adults read at the eighth-grade level. Careful word choices, sentence structure, and voice can help ensure your writing and speaking is accessible to all.

Words should be in their simplest form. For example, don't say utilize, say use. Industry jargon often clutters our communication and is usually misunderstood. For example, most people think of their toilet when you say the word flush. But we often use the word flush to mean flush your water line. Saying, run your water on full blast is a more accessible way to explain what you mean by flush the lines.

Most consumers won't necessarily know what you mean by lines, so use the word pipes, instead. Here are some common industry terms we've changed to more accessible versions for you:

Sentence structure and voice also contribute to the accessibility of the meaning. Generally speaking, active voice creates a simpler sentence structure.

TYPICAL PHRASING

ACCESSIBLE PHRASING

water mains or lines

water pipes

flushing your lines

running your water on full blast

source water

the source of your drinking water

raw water

the source of your drinking water, before it's treated

potable water

water that's suitable for drinking

Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests

The [Flesch-Kincaid Readability scale](#) is a built-in feature of Microsoft Word. It's the single easiest way to test the reading ease of your text. It scans your text and then rates it on a U.S. school grade level. For example, a score of 6.0 means that an average sixth grader can understand the document. Because the average reading level of American adults is eighth grade, you should shoot for this as your target. To access the Flesch-Kincaid test for your document in Microsoft 365:

- Open your Word document
- Select the Review tab
- Click on "Editor" and then go to "Insights" and click on "Document Stats." It may take a few seconds to appear
- A window will pop open and the Flesch-Kincaid Readability score will be near the bottom of the box. If it's above 8, review your document and look for ways to simplify wording

CDC Clear Communication Index

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's \(CDC\) Clear Communication Index](#) is a research-based tool to help you assess the clarity and simplicity of a document. The Index has four introductory questions and 20 scored items that represent the most important characteristics that enhance and aid people's understanding of information. Some of the areas the Index measures are the language used, call to action, use of numbers, information design, and risk.

You can either download a score sheet to manually check the document, or upload your document into their system and the CDC will review and tabulate a score for you, though you will still have to input some information as you go.

Meeting All Needs

An equitable approach to communications means everyone in your service area has equal access to the information you provide, so if there are people in your service area who do not speak English, consider having your materials translated by a professional/certified translator and distributing them alongside any English versions.

For speaking events, it's important to think about all the capabilities of people in your audience. So language interpretation is important, including ASL for the hearing impaired. For the visually impaired, make sure to use visual clues to describe what you are talking about and use appropriate software tools such as image tags in your digital communications.

Be sure to record all virtual meetings and use visual cues to describe the speakers and the slides. Turn on the closed captioning tool to enable the hearing impaired to read what's being said.



Scan or click for

**Flesch-Kincaid
Readability Tests**



Scan or click for

**CDC Clear
Communication
Index**

**TOOLS TO ENSURE
YOUR LANGUAGE IS
CLEAR AND SIMPLE**

To understand the topline issues among people in your service area and find out what they think about your agency and your water

- Talk to local nonprofits who provide social services
- Contact your local health district: www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/
- Host tours and ask questions of them throughout the tour, such as “who do you trust for local news”
- Host information sessions about a topic and provide food and childcare
- Host focus groups at a nearby school or library and provide food and childcare
- Conduct a simple intercept survey by standing at a busy location with a lot of foot traffic and ask folks questions as they walk by
- Pop up a table and tent at a community event; have activities for children and chat with adults

Are They All Your Customers?

Be sure you’re using the right language when referring to your end-users.

- Community – a great word, as a utility, you are a bedrock of the community and this makes the relationship seem two-way
- Customers – a good word, but not everyone is a customer. Make sure this fits your audience
- Ratepayer – not ideal, this reduces the relationship to one that’s only transactional and might make people feel like you only care about their money

So give some careful thought when you use the word customer to make sure it truly applies. And avoid referring to customers as ratepayers, which just relegates them to someone who gives you money. They are so much more than that.



Not everyone who uses your water is a customer.

Physical Access to Information

Once your writing is understandable by all audiences, you need to make sure it's physically accessible to all audiences and that all audiences receive it. This Toolkit provides more detail on this in the How To Reach Your Audiences section, but here are some key questions to consider as you prepare the information:

- Does everyone have access to the internet and email?
- Are they all on social media? Which platforms do you think they are on, and why?
- Do they all receive a bill (and therefore, you have their cell phone, mailing, and email address)?

If the answer is no to any of the above, this underscores why you can't rely on your website, social media, and the bill insert for your primary communications channels. If you rely solely on these channels, it means there are likely large swaths of your audience that are never receiving the information you make available. So, how do you reach people without internet access? Those who don't receive a bill? Those who don't attend your events?

You have to go to them. You'll have to rely on your research about your service area to make a list of potential opportunities that will work specifically for you. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Identify community advocates already working with disadvantaged or marginalized communities and provide information to them to distribute
- Post fliers or meetings at faith-based properties and events
- Post fliers in key retail locations, such as specialty groceries, laundromats, and barbershops
- Post fliers or host meetings at community centers and libraries
- Send fliers through the school system
- Provide articles to home owner or civic associations for their newsletters

ACCESSIBILITY CHECKLIST

- ☐ ***Text is at eighth-grade level (Use Flesch-Kincaid)***
- ☐ ***Sentences are simple and use active voice***
- ☐ ***Text does not include jargon or unexplained acronyms***
- ☐ ***Website text is ADA compliant (e.g. image tags are used)***
- ☐ ***Meetings are offered at varying weekdays and times***
- ☐ ***Childcare is offered at public meetings***
- ☐ ***Meetings are accessible with public transportation***
- ☐ ***Materials are translated into languages spoken in the service area***
- ☐ ***Closed captioning is used for videos and online meetings***