



The Case for Proactive Communications:

Be First, Be Loud, Talk Often

Communication is an essential role of a water utility. Proactive and consistent communication with customers increases a customer's perception of the quality and safety of their tap water, and their overall satisfaction with their tap water.⁵ Trust in tap water is directly related to communication about it. The more memorably you communicate about your water, the greater trust your customers will have in it, and in your agency.

Consumer Expectations

Consumers *expect* and want communication from their water utility.⁶ While constant communication may seem redundant or unnecessary, it helps customers build a positive association with your utility; increasing their trust in you.

TOP 5 CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

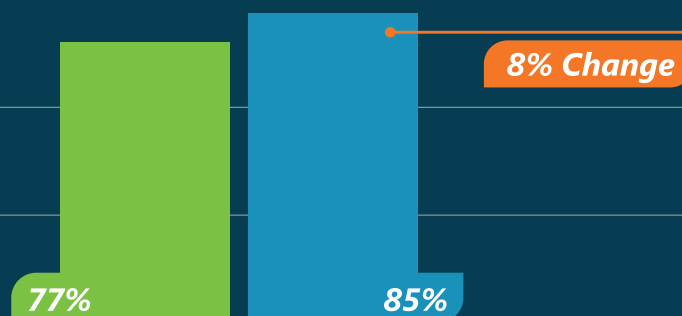
- 1 Personalized service
- 2 More options (for communicating with you, for making payments, etc.)
- 3 Constant communication
- 4 Immediate satisfaction
- 5 Water that looks, tastes, and smells good

For too long, many water utilities have had a “bunker bias” – not sharing information unless it's requested or required, such as when the media calls or a crisis hits. This may have worked in the past, but not in today's era of constant communication. Today, customers want more from all companies they interact with, including yours. The key is to give them the right amount of information at the right time through the channel they prefer.

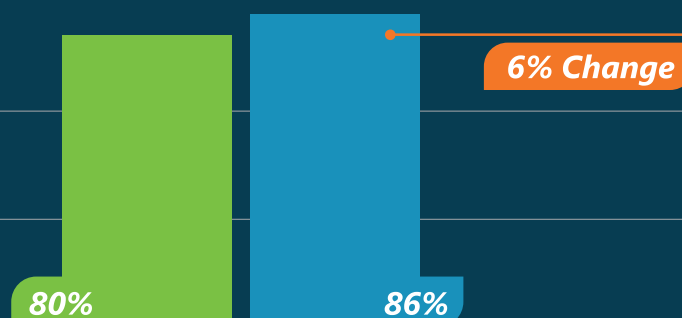
Your utility may not be able to do anything about the look, taste, or smell of the water, but educating customers about why that is, and that these are not indicators of public health, helps build their acceptance of it when the water may not seem good.

Trust in tap water is directly related to communication about it.

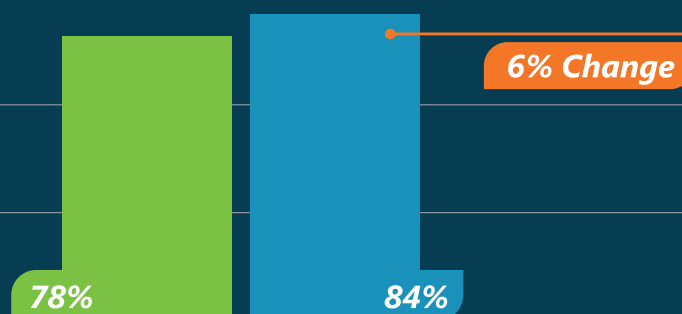
Perception **Without** Additional Communications Perception **With** Additional Communications



CONSIDER THE QUALITY OF THEIR TAP WATER GOOD OR EXCELLENT



REPORT THEIR WATER IS SAFE TO DRINK



ARE SATISFIED WITH THE WATER THEY RECEIVE AT THEIR FAUCET

Be First

The right time to deliver water quality information is now, today, and frequently. In fact, as the drinking water provider in your community, you should be the first voice your community members hear about anything related to drinking water. Consider the following true story:

You hear from AWWA that the Environmental Working Group is about to release a scathing report about PFAS in drinking water. You get your data ready and your talking points and patiently wait for the media to call. The media never contacts you and a few days later, the local and national media are talking about the report, citing EWG's data and igniting fear and anger in your customers. Your social media and customer service phone lines explode.

This case study helps demonstrate the need to be proactive, and the value of sharing information first to ensure the right information is being shared without instilling unnecessary fear. One of the essential truths about communication and establishing you and your utility as the trusted source for water quality information in your service area is:

Whoever is first is right

Being proactive gives you the chance to be the first one to talk about a topic. That opportunity influences your customers' attitudes and beliefs about the topic more than anyone else's. The second or third voices in the conversation can only respond to what's already been said. The burden to disprove the first thing said falls on those second and third voices and they're not often heard, believed, or trusted. So you always want to be first.

Be Loud

You also need to be loud, meaning, your communication must look good enough to catch your customer's eyes, which means it must compete with the thousands of other marketing messages your customers are hearing each day.

You are competing with thousands of messages daily

Imagery, good graphic design, video, and radically accessible language – wording that all people can understand – are the keys to being seen. This Toolkit offers several tips and samples on how to do this.

Talk Often

Finally, you must communicate often. One way to know how often is often enough:

When you are tired of saying the message, know that at that point, your message is only JUST starting to be heard

There is a direct relationship between the amount of communication your customer receives and how much they trust you and their tap water. But they have to remember being communicated to, in order for this to be true. So, your once-a-year CCR isn't enough. Communicating often enough about water quality to be heard, is likely more often than you are doing now. Here's how it might look:

WEEKLY	<i>a post on social media</i>
MONTHLY	<i>an article that's sent to customer emails and featured prominently on your website's home page or a text message about work you are doing in the service area</i>
QUARTERLY	<i>an event (such as an open house, community fair, tour, workshop at a local library, or meeting with a homeowner's association)</i>
ANNUALLY	<i>your CCR mailed, emailed, posted on social, shared or covered by local media, etc.</i>

The only way to grow trust is to communicate proactively, by being first on the topic, being loud enough to hear, and being often enough to remember. This will require your utility to have a culture that prioritizes information sharing with each other and external stakeholders.

Remember, you are the experts in drinking water. It's your voice that should own the conversation about water quality if those conversations are already happening, and be the conversation starter if they haven't happened yet.

If you wait for the CCR each year or create messages and materials that no one notices, you are effectively yielding the conversation to others to have without you. This can result in more scrutiny and distrust, followed by a backlash against investments, so it's imperative you communicate proactively and with confidence.