WATER QUALITY COMMUNICATIONS
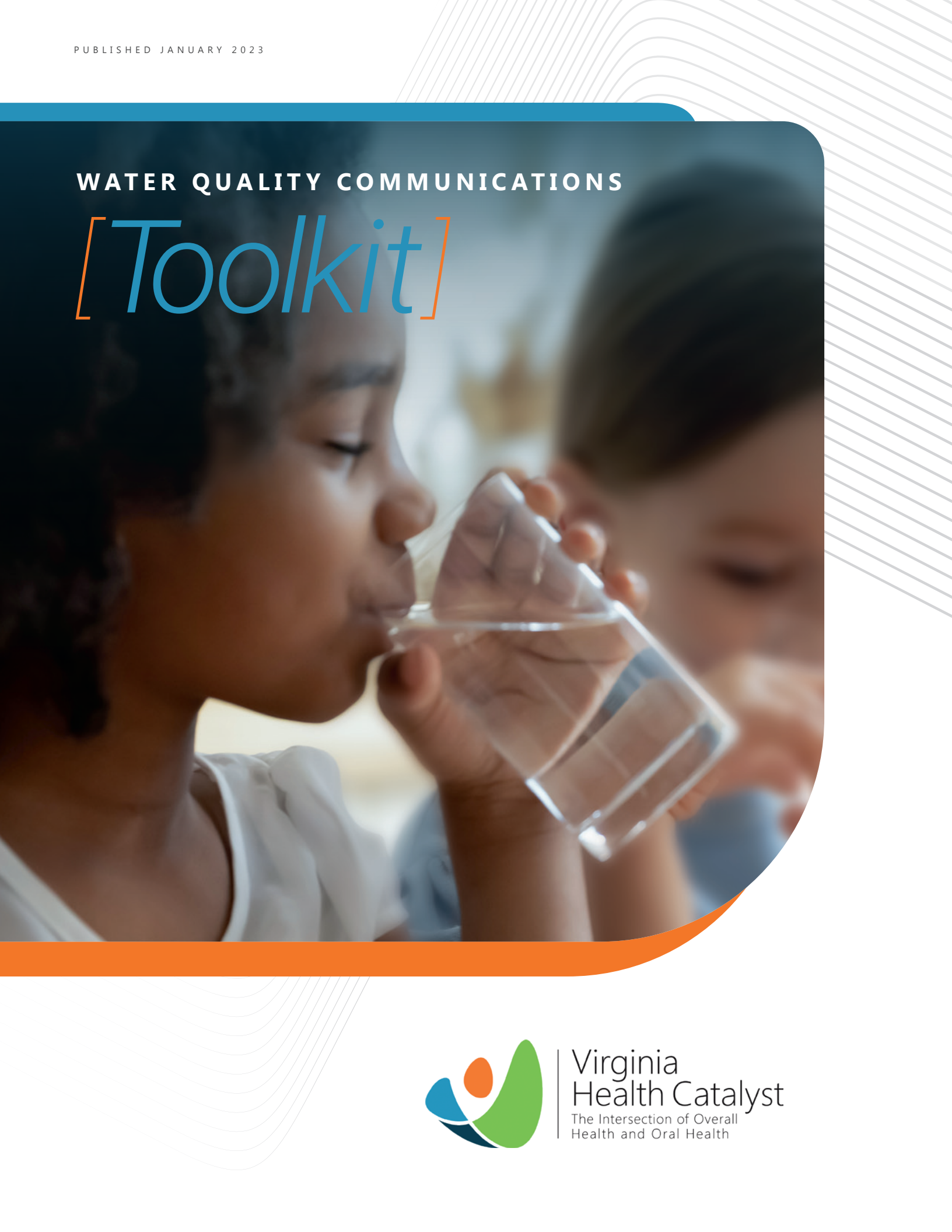# *[Toolkit]*

Virginia
Health Catalyst
The Intersection of Overall
Health and Oral Health

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Virginia Health Catalyst

Introduction

Water is the healthiest drink for children and adults, and drinking water is one of the simplest and least expensive ways to maintain and promote good health. Drinking fluoridated tap water keeps our body functioning efficiently, leads us to consume fewer empty calories, and prevents dental cavities. Public water systems provide consistent, safe water and take rigorous steps to monitor quality. Safe, fluoridated tap water should be the preferred drink of Virginians.

So what's the problem?

Research has shown that nearly 60 million Americans don't drink tap water due to a decline in trust in drinking water quality and safety.[1] While water utilities work hard to provide safe drinking water consistently, catastrophic events like what we see in Flint, MI, and Jackson, MS, affect everyone's perceptions of the quality of their drinking water and of a water utility's ability to provide safe water.

Virginia is fortunate to have some of the safest drinking water in the nation. The VA Office of Drinking Water oversees utilities that provide drinking water to 89% of the population, meaning most Virginia residents have safe drinking water in their homes. But the growing lack of trust leads to fewer and fewer Virginians drinking their tap water. Distrust may decrease support for the water system infrastructure improvements. Community members may also miss the connection between municipal budgets and high-quality drinking water, and be less likely to support financial investments.

Research has shown that communities of color and low-income communities are least likely to trust their drinking water, regardless of its quality.[2] While this lack of trust is deeply rooted in decades of inequities and likely wasn't caused by your utility specifically, it impacts how your customers view you. This perception determines how customers will engage with you during a crisis and how supportive they will be of your work.

Water utilities have a unique relationship with their customers. Customers rely on safe and consistent water in their homes every day without much thought. But if something goes wrong, the utility staff are immediately in the limelight at the center of the problem. When a utility relegates customer communication to just what's required, there is a missed opportunity. As utility staff, you have the opportunity to serve as an ambassador for the water you provide and be experts on tap water in your community. As an anchor institution[3] in your community, your work impacts your community's health, making you a vital cornerstone of the community.

PURPOSE OF
[*Toolkit*]

You have an opportunity to change the perception of drinking water, build meaningful relationships with your customers, and increase trust in drinking water.

Your Consumer Confidence Report (CCR), published once per year, is not solely sufficient for sharing information about water or engaging your community. Due to EPA requirements, the CCR is often not understandable to the average water customer. Many people don't recall ever receiving a CCR, and if they do, they are often more confused about water quality and trust the water less. We hope that improvements can be made to the CCR to make them more reader-friendly, but until then, utilities need to go beyond the CCR to communicate about water quality. It needs to be a core message that's proactively communicated to all water consumers on a regular basis.

That's the purpose of this Toolkit, to help you communicate about water quality in a proactive, radically accessible way, so that all the people in your community become aware of their water quality and what your utility does every day, week, month, and year to ensure it.

Not every utility has the capacity to do everything, but we hope this Toolkit provides ideas for you to pick and choose what fits your budget, resource capacity, and needs.

Don't Make Your CCR Carry All the Water

You are required by law to create and make available to your customers a Consumer Confidence Report (CCR). But, the CCR has been proven ineffective at increasing confidence. In fact, people who read a CCR are likely to trust their drinking water less.[4]

So, when it comes to communicating about your water quality, the CCR, issued once per year, can't carry all the weight of your water quality communications. You must do more. That's the whole point of this Toolkit – to help you communicate all year about your drinking water quality. While we offer other ideas for communication, it's important to take a look at your CCR and see if there are any changes you can make to improve it.

Make sure your CCR is the best it can be

One of the reasons the CCR is often overlooked by customers is because it often looks hard to read. One of the main factors that contributes to this is the design. Small text size and pages that are crowded with information are both unappealing to the eye and hard to read. So, make sure the text is as least 11-point size, and create more space between paragraphs and images. Spread the information over more pages to give the eyes and brain a chance to take in the information. Add imagery of your water source, your employees, and stock photos of people enjoying water. People's faces draw people in.

Free templates for creating your CCR in Word or Squarespace are available for download at www.policyinnovation.org/water/ccr-template. More information can be found on the next page.

Engaging in a proactive communication strategy will:

- Decrease the odds of being selected by an advocacy group for a future negative media event
- Increase your ease in responding effectively to a negative media event
- Increase your community's understanding and support for the services you provide
- Increase your community's perception of you as a leader and trusted source for information

Lack of communication sets you up to:

- Experience the worst if you find yourself in a media challenge
- Lose support for future rate increases
- Lose support for infrastructure needs
- Decrease community understanding and appreciation of the services you provide

5 Ways to Maximize the Impact of Your CCR

✅	❌
DO	**DON'T**
Commit to improving at least one thing in your CCR each year	Don't get overwhelmed. There are lots of ways to make small improvements to a CCR – and many other ways to communicate with your community
Include a reference or link to your CCR information on all materials	Don't only promote the CCR once per year
Create a website dedicated to water quality information	Don't bury your CCR webpage on the website where it's hard to find
Center water quality in all messaging and branding	Don't forget that water quality is a core element of your brand
If you don't know what your customers think of your utility and your water, ask them	Don't assume your customers know you, trust you, like your water

CLICK HERE FOR MORE DETAILS IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Resources

FREE CCR TEMPLATE

www.policyinnovation.org/water/ccr-template

An improved CCR template was created to integrate these do and don'ts. This template is free for anyone to use. It can help you make your CCR clearer, more engaging, and more accessible to broader audiences. You can also pick and choose pieces from the template to include in your current CCR.

This template is approved by the EPA and ODW staff.

It was created by Raftelis in partnership with the Environmental Policy and Innovation Committee (EPIC). You can access the free Word doc template, free Squarespace template, and instructions for use here: www.vahealthcatalyst.org

EPA'S IWRITER

https://ordspub.epa.gov/ords/safewater/f?p=140:LOGIN_DESKTOP

EPA's iWriter tool makes it a bit easier to generate a CCR, though it serves as more of a way to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act than a true communications piece.

Mailers and Info-graphics

Some utilities have gone a step further to ensure their customers know about the CCR and get the information they need and want in a format they can understand. Instead of mailing the actual CCR to each household, they post their CCR as a PDF to their website and they mail something else to every household – a brief, colorful piece that talks about the CCR, its importance, and some of the most critical information it contains that is of interest to customers. It offers a link to the full CCR for those who want it, but serves as a consumer-friendly summary of key points. Here's an example from Charlotte Water.

ADDITIONAL CCR RESOURCES CAN BE FOUND IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Top 10 Things *To Do Today* to Enhance Your Water Quality Communications

For the busy utility professional, the following list includes core actions you can take to elevate and enhance your water quality communications immediately. Each item references a page number in this Toolkit with more information when you're ready.

1

Get Proactive

Start communicating to customers about water quality on a weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual (via the CCR) basis. If you need the approval to do this, there is some guidance for making the case to leadership for a measured, proactive approach.

2

Update Your Water Quality Messages

Start using the messaging platform in this Toolkit for all your materials (website, social media, fact sheets, etc.) and update all existing materials and share the revised materials with your staff.

3

Create a Water Quality Web Page

Make sure you have a web page dedicated to water quality. In addition to links to your latest CCR, add a water quality FAQ, key terms defined, and facts and figures about how often you sample and test the water. Include a way for those who read your web page to get in touch with someone for more information. See the section on Owned Media for some good examples.

4

Commit to One Post Per Week on Social Media

Make sure that every single week you make at least one proactive post (not responding to an event) about your water quality. Topics can include: where your water comes from, how you treat it, how you monitor and test it, how often you test it, news about key contaminants, and more.

5

Create a Presentation

Using PowerPoint, Slide Share, or a similar tool, create a 20-minute presentation about your water quality and the work your team does to ensure the water's safety. Discuss the process of delivering water from the source to the tap and use lots of imagery and data to tell your story. Post this to your website and make a plan to deliver to groups in your community. Don't forget to create a version suitable for elementary students and incorporate outreach to schools in your plan.

6

Make Friends

There are some key people and groups in your service area who can be advocates for you. Develop strong professional relationships with them, such as with your local health department, your governing board, and influential environmental groups.

7

Invite People In

Work with your operations staff to design and script a tour of your treatment facilities and laboratory, then invite the media, customers, elected officials, and others for a behind-the-scenes look at operations.

8

Download and Review AWWA's *Trending In An Instant*

To develop your ability to handle stakeholders who come to you in an agitated or emotional state, consult this resource and take note of the tips and templates to use to compassionately acknowledge their emotions and gently bring the conversation back where reason prevails.

9

Prioritize Your Messages

Talk to your water quality staff, customer service staff, and leadership to determine the top three water quality concerns in your service area and focus on just those three for the next year.

10

Attract Attention With Imagery and Video

Do a careful review of your website, fact sheets, social media, and any other tool you are using to communicate water quality, and check for photos and videos. Every single page should have an image and most images should feature people's faces. Your website and social media should regularly feature videos.

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

8% Change

77% 85%
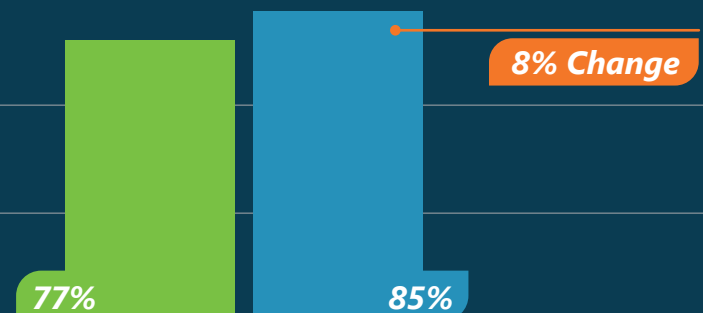
CONSIDER THE QUALITY OF THEIR TAP WATER GOOD OR EXCELLENT

6% Change

80% 86%
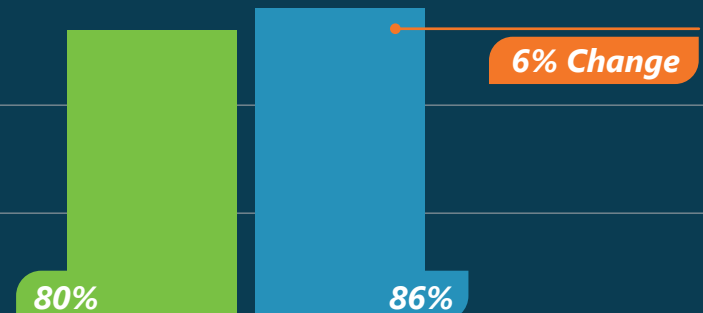
REPORT THEIR WATER IS SAFE TO DRINK

6% Change

78% 84%
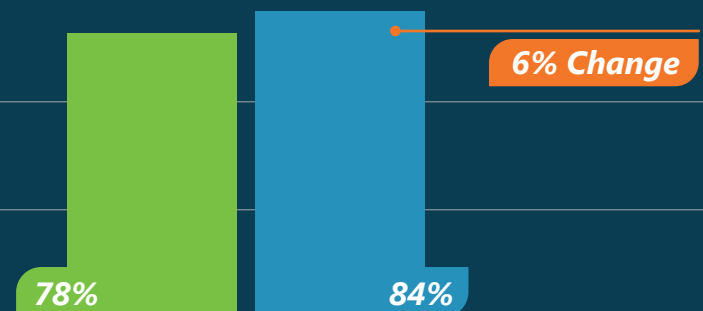
ARE SATISFIED WITH THE WATER THEY RECEIVE AT THEIR FAUCET

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	*a post on social media*
MONTHLY	*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*
QUARTERLY	*an event (such as an open house, community fair, tour, workshop at a local library, or meeting with a homeowner's association)*
ANNUALLY	*your CCR mailed, emailed, posted on social, shared or covered by local media, etc.*

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.

The Importance of Internal Communication

One could argue that of all the audiences you need to communicate with, your internal audience – employees – is most important. Oftentimes, the water utility ranks as one of the largest employers in the service area. That's a lot of people working for you, who are also likely to be customers, who are also likely willing to be unofficial ambassadors for your utility.

Empowering your employees with talking points on water quality is a great way to help build their role within the organization, it builds their confidence when talking about their work and the water, and it enhances their pride. So before you do any major outreach to your community about water quality (or a rate increase, policy change, or major investment for that matter) make sure you've shared the information with them first.

The Order Matters

There is a recommended order for communicating internally with staff before going to the outside world with information because there are some individuals or groups that should review and approve your content first. Here's our suggestion:

WATER QUALITY STAFF	OPERATIONS	LEGAL	LEADER	ALL OTHER STAFF

Create a Team

Develop an internal team of people at your utility that can support you with communications and outreach. Consider someone from operations, engineering, water quality, field service and customer service. Share the Toolkit with them and set up quarterly meetings to review water quality issues, questions, feedback, and share ideas for handling them both strategically and tactically.

Balancing Conflicting Advice on Messages

Keep in mind there may be a bit of negotiation on the words you use. Water quality staff and engineers will want the words to be extremely precise. Lawyers will want words that are not super specific or sensitive. Your job as the communicator for the organization is to help them understand that the words need to strike a balance between being the most accurate, the most understandable, and the most specific. This underscores the importance of taking the time to settle these messages with them in peace times, so you are not negotiating word choices during a crisis.

The water quality messaging we provide in the Resource Library of this Toolkit has been sourced from EPA and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH). It has been reviewed by communication professionals, water quality experts, and staff at VDH. Let your reviewers know that, so they can have some assurance that the words and information here is solid. If they need to change it, just make sure it doesn't lose clarity.

CLICK HERE TO VIEW MESSAGE MAPS IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Ways to Share Info With Staff

When all the approvals have been obtained, it's time to share this with your staff. Here are a variety of ways to get this material in front of your staff ambassadors and encourage them to share it, too:

- Write and send an email or write a blurb about it and share it on the employee Intranet, linking them to the water quality web page
- Create and distribute an Employee "Cheat Sheet" they can post in their office or cube that showcases the top 10 water quality messages and proof points
- Include an article in the employee newsletter, if you have one, that provides the website and a list of resources they can tap into
- Host a lunch and learn, where employees can bring their lunch and you walk them through the top messages and share the website you created where all your water quality information resides
- If you're planning an education campaign, host a campaign launch party. Invite all staff, serve lunch, and have different stations that explain different aspects of water quality. Enlist other members of staff to host each station and provide branded giveaways and handouts

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 Flesh-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
Flesh-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*

Communication Channels: How to Reach Your Audiences

There are lots of ways to reach your audiences and they generally fall into these four categories: media relations, social media, advertising, and owned media. Which channel you select should not be random. You want to pick the strategy (or mix of strategies) that's more likely to reach the key people you want to reach. Keep in mind that some of these will miss certain groups of people. Use the table for some guidance on when to select which channel and remember that an approach that incorporates a little bit of all of them helps ensure your audiences see and hear your messages multiple times in multiple ways, which increases their likelihood of remembering them. Don't worry if you can't do all of these things for all audiences. The important thing is to focus any limited resources on the most important messages and the most critical audiences you want to hear those messages – here are some examples:

AUDIENCE SEGMENT	MESSAGE TOPIC
Residential customers with lawns	Water conservation
Commercial customers	Rate increases that may impact them more than others
People caring for children, older persons, or people with compromised immunity	Water quality

The four main communication channels all have benefits and challenges. The pros and cons of each are on the next page, as well as tips and ideas of how to maximize each channel.

	What is it?	Your Goal	Your Challenge	The Risk	Best for When you Want to
MEDIA RELATIONS	Working with journalists to have your story covered by their outlet, written by them Pitch examples provided in the text	You want third-party credibility and widespread awareness	It's tough to get their attention Takes time to develop good content and imagery Must be written in a "what's in it for them" angle	You have little to no control over the story that gets told	Reach middle-age to older audiences Target specific groups in your communities with different outlets
SOCIAL MEDIA	Different platforms of user-generated content, with opportunities for participants to become of aware of issues and engage on them. (Facebook, Next Door, Instagram, etc.) See text for insights into each platform	You want to raise awareness about a topic You want to build relationships with community members You want to convey your human side	These platforms require a human voice and authenticity The best content is entertaining, innovative, and insightful Takes time to do well	You have little control over the message after you post Trolls can be disruptive Some platforms enable misinformation to spread	Reach a wide spectrum of audiences Amplify information through influencers and followers *Platforms have very specific followings. Consult the table in the text for insights*
ADVERTISING	Placing messages on an external platform (roadside billboard, social media, newspaper, magazine, radio or television station, etc.) for a fee	You want to fully control the message and/or you want to target a certain group or neighborhood	Traditional advertising can be expensive Requires professional design/production Can require long lead time	Some people don't trust advertising as being truthful	Target certain groups or blanket you service area
OWNED MEDIA	This is any material you own, such as a website, newsletter, brochure, presentation See text for some examples of each type	Tell your story from your perspective	Materials must compete with other marketing Requires professional design and production Requires advanced thought and lead times Can be costly	You don't know who sees or reads the material Can require updates frequently Hard to get it to all the different audiences	Control the message with your own branded materials

Media Relations

Despite the popularity of social media, engaging traditional print and broadcast media is still a very effective way to raise local awareness of your work in and value to your local community. A positive or even balanced media story on your operations has greater impact on audiences than what can be read on your website or blog, as it comes from a neutral third party. In addition, media articles can do double duty by providing credible content that you can amplify through social media.

As is the case with informing your policymakers and elected officials, it will take time to inform and educate your local media outlets about the difficult but rewarding work of being a water provider. The relationships you build will help you earn valuable credibility with them, and help build a reservoir of goodwill should a crisis situation ever arise.

When it comes to water quality, it's better to proactively pitch a story than wait for a negative news article to hit or to receive a call from a reporter. Once you receive a call, chances are, the reporter already has their angle. When you pitch it to them, you can influence how the story is written.

Tips for Proactively Pitching A Story

Preparation
- Carefully identify people who are subject matter experts at your facility. Make sure they are credible, can answer questions crisply and effectively, and are not likely to get nervous in front of a camera.
- Research who would cover public health in your media outlets and study what they write about so that when it's time to approach them with a story idea, you can personalize it to them. It's important to keep this list updated, so check it quarterly, as reporters move positions a lot.

Execution
- Most reporters today prefer pitches by email.
- Your email pitch should be one to three sentences, getting quickly to the heart of what you're offering.
- Think like your customer. What would they care about? Be concerned about? Want to know? Write it with them in mind.
- The best pitches are tied to current or trending news – stuff people are already interested in.
- The subject line is the most important part of the email. Reporters receive hundreds of emails each day, so yours will need to stand out. Make it descriptive, aspirational, and action-oriented.

EXAMPLE:
A story you pitch to talk about the results of PFAS testing might say: *Residents of ABC Town Can Rest Assured No "Forever Chemicals" in Water*

A story you might pitch to talk about a source water protection program might say: *Residents of ABC Town to Receive Better Quality Drinking Water*

- Send story ideas or news releases directly to individuals, not a long list, and never CC other reporters.
- Never send an unsolicited attachment. News organizations are wary of viruses and will almost never open an attachment they haven't asked for. So offer photos or graphics, then wait for them to accept the offer before sending.

Follow Up
- Once you've made contact and are in conversation, make sure you are always helpful and responsive. Be someone they know is a competent source that makes their job easier.
- Invite media to organizational events and treat them as an important guest.
- Follow up in three days, five days, and seven days.
- Your follow up email can be as simple as forwarding the message you originally sent and asking, "Any interest?"
- In your second follow up, offer an image or video or infographic that you didn't offer previously.
- In your third follow up, offer a specific person to them they can interview, with a short bio embedded in the email.

When You're Not Pitching

- Help reporters and producers by doing the prep work - package your story so it's ready to go. Line up the video, imagery, and interviews with operators, engineers, and consumers, all the people involved in the process of delivering high-quality drinking water.
- Continue to stay in contact long after they run your story. Send reporters story ideas that don't involve your organization but could benefit them. Don't be the one who only calls when they need a favor.
- Primary research you conduct can often be the basis for a positive news article, so share customer survey results and other research that is informing decisions and policies being made at your utility.
- Provide special behind-the-scenes tours and access to reporters.
- Make sure all members of your agency that may end up in front of a camera or on a microphone have been media trained.

A Reporter Bites — Now What?

- Get back to the reporter immediately to confirm interest, information needs, and deadlines.
- Brainstorm all the questions that are most likely to get asked by the reporter and conduct a mock interview with your spokesperson to ensure they are comfortable with the questions they are most likely to be asked. Don't shy away from including "worst-case" questions you think are unlikely to get asked but would rattle your spokesperson.
- Prepare a digital media kit with key graphics to share with the reporter to help visually communicate your key messages. You can provide this on a branded flash drive or a link to a page on your website that's just for the media.
- Consider making an audio or video recording of the interview for your files. This can help you provide constructive feedback to your spokesperson after the interview to improve their performance next time, give you valuable protection against the risk of being misquoted by the reporter, and provide great content you can reuse for social media.

TIPS FOR SPEAKING TO THE MEDIA

1 *Wear solid colors. Avoid small patterns, prints, all-white, and all-black.*

2 *Do not wear big jewelry.*

3 *Have water nearby in case your throat dries up.*

4 *Let the crew apply powder makeup if they would like - they're trying to make you look your best!*

5 *Bring a copy of your core key messages - don't read from them directly, but it can be comforting to have notes available.*

6 *Speak clearly, succinctly, and do not use jargon or acronyms. Remember accessible language.*

7 *Speak with energy and intonation.*

8 *Don't speculate. Say, "I don't know, but I'll get that information to you."*

9 *Beware of fidgeting such as swaying back and forth, toying with a pen or tapping your feet. If you're seated, make sure the chair is stable and doesn't recline or swivel.*

10 *Ignore the camera and look at the person asking the questions. This can make it feel much more like you are having a one-on-one conversation, which can be far more comfortable and allow you to appear relaxed and comfortable.*

11 *For recorded (not live) interviews, feel free to ask for another shot at answering the question if you think you could give a more succinct or compelling answer. Also, answering the question is not a race! Take a moment before answering to compose yourself.*

Example Media Pitch

Though not about water quality, here's an example of how Green Bay Water Utility in Wisconsin turned an inquiry about a water main break into a story about leak detection technology. Our thanks to Communications Director Andrea Hay for sharing this sample. The reporter had written to her asking about a water main break. This was her response:

If you're looking for a fresh angle on the tired ole water main break beat, Green Bay Water Utility has begun using a satellite leak detection service called Utilis. This satellite was invented to discover water on MARS! It's SUPER interesting because the satellite is literally able to detect when TREATED water is leaking into the ground—alerting us to leaks, and preventing big main breaks. Would you be interested in interviewing Nancy about this? Looks like she has availability for it this morning, and we could even get some b-roll from Utilis of how it works! Let me know

The Resulting Story

Scan or click for

Out-Of-This-World Technology Helps Green Bay Spot Leaking Water Pipes.

Another pitch example comes to us from Michelle Zdrodowski, Chief Public Affairs Officer for the Great Lakes Water Authority:

Hi Derek – Reaching out as I recently spoke with Roop Raj regarding a potential Drinking Water Week story (May 1-7) with the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). If you're interested, we'd love to share an inside look at the water treatment process and how GLWA provides high-quality drinking water sourced from the Detroit River and surrounding Great Lakes to 3.8 million southeast Michigan residents. Through its One Water Cycle (see attached), GLWA then returns water back to the environment oftentimes cleaner than when it was received. Let us know if you're interested in coming to Water Works Park early next week for a tour of the water treatment process and interview with GLWA's Chief Operating Officer of Water and Field Services. Thanks in advance!

The Resulting Story
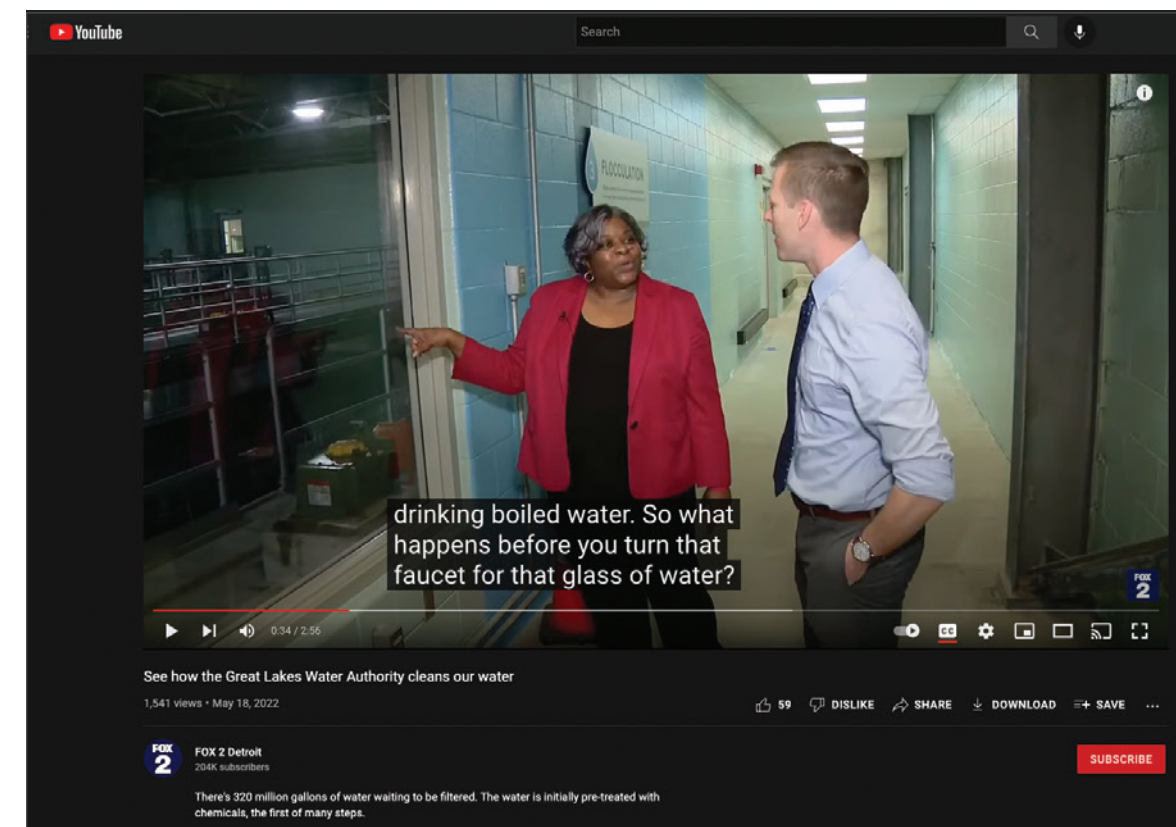
Scan or click for

See how the Great Lakes Water Authority cleans our water

Social Media

Facebook

Facebook continues to dominate the social media market in sheer numbers. Beware that engagement from younger audiences has been dropping steadily. Also understand that Facebook is very focused on its advertising sales, so organic (unpaid) content is served much less frequently to followers than you might think. To have a real impact on Facebook, you will need to pay for posts and those posts will need to incorporate more visual interest than just text.

LinkedIn

Even though LinkedIn rose to fame as a business networking site, one-third of all U.S. adults are on LinkedIn and it's the largest demographic of users between 30 and 49, with half of them having a college-level education. This makes LinkedIn a great choice, plus the fact that most folks expect business or brand advice and news on LinkedIn, and prefer to use Facebook and Instagram for more personal posts.

Instagram

Instagram can help you round out your reach to a broader age range. With average daily usage of almost an hour, Instagram is perfect for building awareness with younger adults of any gender. In fact, 90% of Instagram users actively follow a business account, a fact that makes Instagram a more attractive option to a public agency than Facebook. But take note, Instagram requires more of you. It's a visual platform, so pictures and videos are needed here.

Twitter

While Twitter is popular, there may be more downside than value. It has the largest number of fake accounts of all the platforms, and because of the ephemeral nature of the tool, it's hard to get noticed unless your content is extremely interesting, entertaining, or provocative, something that the public sector can often struggle with. Our advice is to skip Twitter as an awareness or engagement tool but keep an account to broadcast emergency information during a crisis.

TikTok

TikTok poses an incredible, untapped opportunity for utilities to help build awareness around water quality. Users post up to three-minute storytelling videos and because the content is extremely personal and human, the engagement and potential for engagement are extraordinary. TikTok already has more users than LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and Snapchat combined, at 150 million daily users. If you haven't yet tried it, open a TikTok account and set aside 10 to 20 minutes each day for a week or two to develop your understanding of how it's being used. The video editing tools are user-friendly and the storytelling opportunities are endless.

42% of users took a break from Facebook in 2021. Only 10% of Facebook's monthly active users are in the US and Canada combined, the rest are in other countries.

Platform	Typical User	Recommended Post Frequency	Best Time to Post
Facebook	Ages 44-60 More female than male	1-2 times *daily*	Weekday Mornings
LinkedIn	Ages 24-60 Evenly split male/female	2-5 times *weekly*	9 am, 12 pm, 4 pm
Instagram	Ages 18-24 Evenly split male/female	1-3 times *daily*	10 am, 3 pm
Twitter	Ages 25-34 More male than female	5 times *daily*	Evening/late night
Tik Tok	Ages 16-34 More female than male	1-3 times *daily*	7:00 pm

Content You Should Post

Social media is not like other more formal forms of communication. People turn to social media first and foremost to be entertained. Second, they want to engage with others. Third, they want to be empowered with information. Last, they seek information to learn something, so educating should be your last goal.

Most local governments and utilities miss this key part about their content – that education should be your last priority. Typical utility posts are text-heavy, educational in nature, or use a corporate tone, which is a turn-off on social media. This sort of content gets overlooked in favor of more entertaining and engaging content. That's why more personal and entertaining posts, with imagery, and especially video, are so crucial to your success on these platforms. Engaging followers means involving your audience in some way.

Entertain
- Show your staff drawing samples and conducting lab experiments
- Show your staff leading presentations to groups or leading tours of facilities
- Videos are a great way to entertain, so long as the education is secondary. Show employees enjoying their work
- Play on words. Poke fun at yourself. Insert yourself into pop culture

Engage
- Create fun trivia quizzes and offer giveaways as a reward for the first correct answer
- Invite stories and input from customers
- Conduct a quick poll and share results

Make sure your content empowers your audiences to help themselves – and make the learning subtle. The more entertaining and engaging, the more memorable.

Empower
- Since fluoride is an important part of dental health, partner with a local dentist who will share tips for proper brushing and flossing techniques, and insert a message about the benefits of fluoride
- Invite your audiences to meetings where you'll be discussing key projects, investments, or rate changes. Invite their questions and comments
- Share some tips for handling grease in the kitchen (instead of dumping it down the drain)

Educate
- Talk about the perils of cross connections and backflow
- Share articles from reputable sources (like academia) that help provide context for certain contaminants like lead or PFAS
- Describe the water treatment process by sharing a diagram or video of what happens in the plant
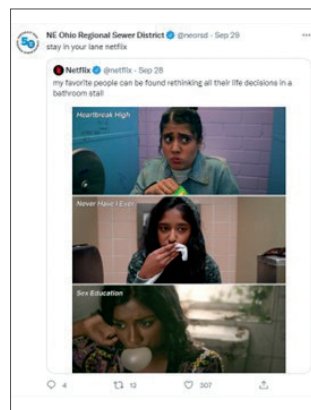
NORTHEAST OHIO REGIONAL SEWER DISTRICT HAS MASTERED THIS ART. FOLLOW THEM FOR IDEAS ON HOW TO AMP UP THE ENTERTAINMENT FACTOR ON YOUR ACCOUNT

Measure What Matters

One of the benefits of digital marketing over broadcast media or traditional advertising is you can actually track who sees your content, when they see it, and where they see it. It's tempting to measure success by tallying the number of likes and follows, but this can be misleading. A steady increase in likes and followers are good signs, for sure, but they alone can't tell you everything. Having more than 4,000 followers does not necessarily mean they will all give you the benefit of the doubt if you make a mistake, so keep the data in perspective. The number of followers you have is an opportunity to reach more people, but the amount and type of engagement tells you more about what they're taking in and understanding. The best way to know if your outreach is working is through conversations with people. Take every opportunity when you are speaking with a customer to gauge their perception and how they got there.

What to look for
- If they are commenting, what are they saying? Is it support? Frustration? Misinformation?
- Are they sharing your content? That's a sign of true value.
- Who is commenting and sharing? Are they trusted community leaders or antagonizers?

Having a following of positive community influencers, even a small number of them, can be more valuable to you than thousands of followers who rarely like or share your content.

Where to go from here
To determine which platform works for you, review your statistics over time and ask yourself:
- Has following grown?
- Has the number of post likes grown or is it sporadic?
- Make a note of what type of content gets more likes, comments, and shares, and make sure that you're delivering more like that.
- Evaluate comments to understand where your community is confused or misinformed and focus content on clarifying the matter.
- Examine who is following you and invest some time making connections in real life, and asking key community influencers to follow and share your content.

If, upon your examination, the following hasn't been steadily growing, the post likes are low (less than 10), or you see more extraneous comments than those pertinent to the post, then it may be time to consider moving away from the platform and expending your efforts elsewhere.

To confirm, poll your community and ask them where they spend time online. Post a survey or host informal focus groups or conduct quick interviews downtown where people are gathered. The bottom line is to find out where they are and be there.

Advertising

One often overlooked advertising opportunity is streaming services. In 2021, Charlotte Water used Spotify ads to promote payment options. This image pops on a mobile screen while a 30-second audio advertisement plays:

CHARLOTTE WATER CARES

WANT A FRESH START FOR THE NEW YEAR?

Click here or call 311 for help paying your water bill!

FEMALE VOICE: These days I'm stressed about the pandemic AND stressed about paying my utility bills. A financial fresh start would really help me right now... but where do I begin?

YOUR VOICE: The pandemic hit us all hard. Many Charlotte Water customers have fallen behind on their water bills and face disconnection... But financial aid is available for those looking for help with their bills....Call 311 or visit CharlotteWater.org to learn more.

OUTCOMES: The ad played for nine weeks, was heard more than seven times by each listener, received more than 600,000 impressions, and more than 1,200 clicks to their website.

The digital/online approaches are great because you can truly target audiences precisely by specific demographic and/or geographic areas and track your reach in real time. Mid-campaign course corrections are easier with certain formats (social media, Google ads) than more traditional means such as billboards and television ads.

Timing is Everything

You have a lot of water quality information to share. Prioritize it by season. Meet with your operations and water quality staff, as well as customer service and leadership, to determine the top two or three water quality concerns for each season, and prioritize your messaging around those two or three topics. Here are some ideas to get you started:

___

January - March
Road salt
Frozen pipes

___

April - June
Cross connection
Spring hydrant maintenance

___

July - September
Algal blooms
Bottled vs tap water

___

October - December
Winterizing pipes
Fluoride benefits

Owned Media

Websites

Your website is your 24-7-365 storefront, so it should have all the information your customers and community members would want about water quality so they can access it on their time. Your website should be created with a responsive design, meaning it looks as good on a tablet or phone as it does on a desktop computer. Test it out.

Your water quality page should be a top-level link from your home page because water quality is the core of your business. As has been said throughout this Toolkit, use terms that your customers would use if they were looking for information – so the link name should be Water Quality, not something ambiguous like Protecting Public Health.
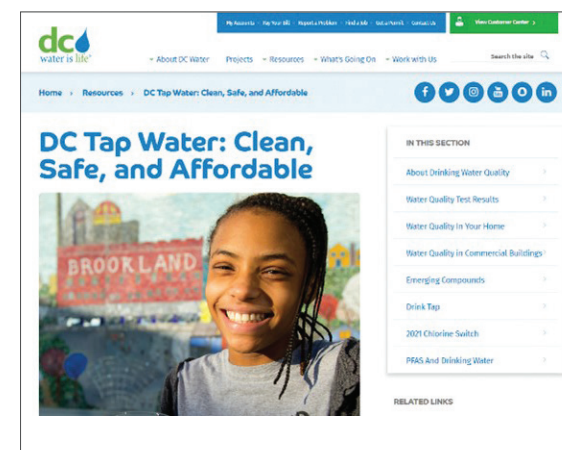
DC WATER QUALITY WEB PAGE
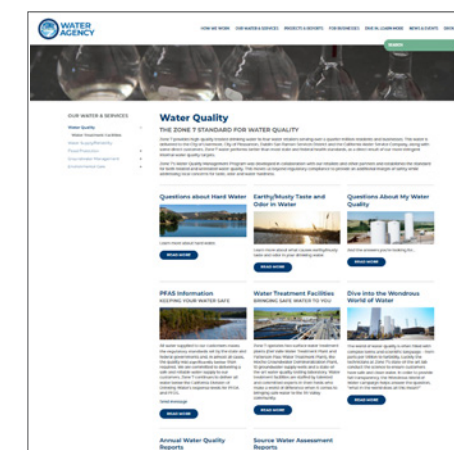
ZONE 7 WATER AGENCY WATER QUALITY PAGE

CLICK HERE PHOTO AND VIDEO GUIDANCE IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Your Water Quality web page should have the following information
• A clear message that the water is safe (or whatever you are allowed to say)
• Pictures! See the Resource Library for photo and video guidance
• Connect back to utility staff, have questions about your water? Talk to us! Call us or follow us on social
• How to connect with utility staff in the community, upcoming events, etc.
• Water info:
  • *Where does the water come from?*
  • *How is the source of drinking water protected from contamination?*
  • *How is the water treated?*
  • *How often you test the water and what you test for?*
  • *How it is sampled and where?*
  • *Results of tests – a link to your CCR*
• The shared role a customer has with your utility in maintaining good water quality in their home
  • *Plumbing materials like lead and copper*
  • *Standing/stale water and the risk of Legionella*
  • *Cross connection and backflow prevention*
  • *Using cold water for cooking*
• FAQs – build these using your interactions with customers

Keep in mind, however, that even the best of websites cannot do everything for you. Merely having one is not enough. It's a good place to start, but you have to do the work to drive people to it, using all the other strategies we talk about here.

Newsletters

An emailed or snail-mailed newsletter can be an effective way to stay in touch with customers and share information of interest to them during that month or quarter. The trick is timing of the information. Emailed newsletters can often be easier to manage because the lead time is often much shorter, whereas snail mailed newsletters might have a one- to three-month lead time to account for printing and mailing, especially if it's inserted with quarterly bills. You have to be thinking three months ahead to what would still be timely for the last customer to receive it.

Many e-newsletter programs enable you to upload a simple database of emails and customize a template with your colors and logo.

Your articles should be short, no greater than 250 words, and link readers to your website or customer service for more information. Use lots of pictures of staff and events to draw interest and consider infographics, which can convey a lot of information in a tight, interesting package.

Consider having some recurring sections to set expectations for content. Here are some content suggestions, which are ideal for newsletters but could also be incorporated into your social media, advertising or other strategies:

General Manager/Executive Director Message - a brief personal note that conveys what's on their mind and invites input and attendance at meetings

Projects Underway (photos, timelines, costs, impacts to customers, and anticipated outcomes/benefits)

Events/Learning Opportunities

Did You Know - fun facts about water quality, the laboratory, sampling, or other related items

What You Can Do - try to offer the customer some actions they can take that are seasonally appropriate that benefit water quality, such as low or no fertilizer, judicious use of salt in the winter, running the water after vacation before you use it, installing backflow devices, etc.

Bill Inserts

Bill inserts are often an easy, cost-effective way to get some information to your customers, but don't count on them for anything critical. Reserve bill inserts for content that's also served up somewhere else, as you can't count on everyone reading it, and of course, some customers of your water don't receive a bill.

Paying Your Water Bill Just Got Easier, With Monthly Billing

Sterling Heights
InnovatingLiving

This spring we're transitioning to monthly billing. This will create smaller, more frequent bills to help you manage your monthly budget better and help you better connect how much water you use to the amount you pay.

Monthly Bills Comparison
ELECTRIC $110
CABLE TV $85
NATURAL GAS $72
WATER $65
INTERNET $60

If you are receiving this bill in

March	April	May
Your last quarterly bill will be on **April 1**	Your last quarterly bill will be on **May 1**	Your last quarterly bill will be on **June 1**
It will include water use in these months: **April and May**	It will include water use in these months: **April**	It will include water use in these months: **March, April, May**

Regardless of what month you received this bill, your first monthly bill will arrive on June 1.

The best part is, with all these changes your water is still a great value at less than a penny per gallon to all the things you need to do, every day, to stay clean and healthy.

SAMPLE BILL INSERT FROM STERLING HEIGHTS, MI

Fact sheets

Fact sheets have been around forever and are still a great tool if done well. The key is to not overload the fact sheet with text. Fact sheets should be just that – facts – with lots of graphics and images. They should answer briefly, the what, why, and how of the content and drive readers to the website or customer service for more information. A sample fact sheet and editable Word template have been provided in the Resource Library to give you a sense of the amount of text and imagery to consider.
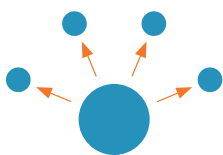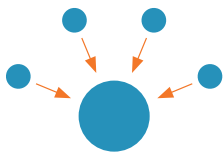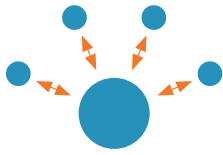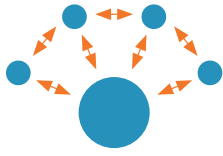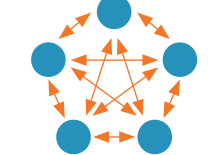
SAMPLE FACT SHEET AVAILABLE IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

How to Engage Your Audiences

Communication as described in the previous section (one-way out) is critical, but utilities will have more success if they go a step further to also engage their audiences in two-way communication. This is especially true for water quality, as it can be a topic fraught with emotion. Two-way communication is more about relationship building because the information flow goes both ways. A utility can learn a lot by listening to its customers, and this is vital for developing a trusted relationship.

How you engage your audiences is dependent on your goal of the engagement. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) has created a framework, or Spectrum, that describes the different levels of engagement you can pursue, depending on your goals, your time frame, resources available, levels of concern, and for the most part, whether you are seeking input toward a decision. The Spectrum also sets out the "promise to the public" for each level of participation.

	GOAL	PROMISE
Inform	To provide balance and objective information in a timely manner	"We will keep you informed."
Consult	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions	"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns."
Involve	To work with the public to make sure that concerns and needs are considered and understood	"We will work with you to ensure you concerns and needs are directly reflected in the decisions made."
Collaborate	To partner with the public in each aspect of decision-making	"We will look to you for advice and innovation in decisions as much as possible."
Empower	To place the final decision-making in the hands of the public	"We will implement what you decided."

Credit: International Association of Public Participation

The vast majority of your engagement may only need to advance from the Inform stage to the Consult stage, which gives you a chance to hear from your stakeholders what's concerning them, so you can effectively address it. Most utilities will be in the Consult, Involve, or Collaborate zones of the Spectrum. While all stages empower your customers, IAP2 considers the Empower stage to be one where your stakeholders are making a final decision. This is fairly rare, but an option to consider if trust is low and/or the topic is super controversial.

For example, if you have a well that is under the influence of surface water – meaning, the water is testing positive for e. coli.—you will want to engage the customers served by this well in a process of decision making about what to do. Your role in the process is to be very transparent and provide all the information they need to form opinions about what to do. You may, even, in this case, yield to them for the decision about whether to pursue another well or add treatment to the current well, or add a pipeline to another source.

In a post-pandemic world, we don't assume engagement will happen in person as it often used to. Now we know that lots of people like the option of virtual engagement so they can avoid traffic or the hassle of childcare if they want to attend an evening or weekend meeting.

Proven Techniques
Develop a Partner Network
You are an anchor to your community and a great way to deepen your connections is to develop relationships with all the community groups, not just those focused on health or the environment. Rely on influencers and trusted advisors in the community to help you reach and deepen relationships with more customers. Reaching your whole service area, including the traditionally underserved or marginalized segments of the population can be a challenge. One of your greatest assets in this respect are organizations and agencies, which may be part of the local government or nonprofit, who have established, trusted relationships with community members. These may include social service agencies or organizations; public transportation agencies; health and wellness organizations; schools; faith-based organizations; services for older populations; and services for multicultural communities. The River Network has a great resource for showing how to build connections in your community. Check it out. Building Blocks of Trust: www.rivernetwork.org/resource/building-blocks-of-trust-creating-authentic-and-equitable-relationships-between-community-organizations-and-water-utilities/

Make a list of these organizations and reach out and introduce yourself. Share with them information about water quality, and your goal of opening the lines of two-way communications with their members. Things you can do to help each other:
• Ask for their advice and help to reach their members
• Equip them with information and materials they can distribute to members
• Offer to speak on topics of interest at their meetings
• Invite them to tour your facilities
• Make sure their leadership is added to your key call list for emergencies

Consider the Location
Whatever you do, be sure to consider the accessibility of the location of your engagement event. Hosting events at community centers, churches, or near grocery stores can help draw in people who are reluctant, particularly if you tie it into another community event. Make it a welcoming experience by offering refreshments and freebies, and consider a value-add such as having someone there who can help with payment issues.

Proven Techniques Continued

Host Tours

Hosting tours is an incredible way to provide operational transparency, and this is a key way you build trust in, and value for, what you do. Make sure you have one or two staff people who are friendly and knowledgeable about the water system and operations. Then sit down with them and talk through what some stops along the tour should be and what messages you want to convey. Prepare some answers to tough questions they may receive and help them rehearse their responses. Consider developing age-appropriate materials, such as a map of the treatment works and water system, that you can hand out to folks who attend.

In addition to working with community partners and hosting tours, there are dozens of approaches that bring people together for meaningful, enjoyable, productive, solutions-based discussions of issues at hand. Among these are:

Open House

An informal setting with multiple displays where participants rotate through stations and discuss specific topics with project staff. Information is presented cafeteria-style, one-on-one, with participants choosing the stations that have information of interest to them. This takes away the opportunity to grandstand in front of an audience and enables quality back and forth with subject matter experts.

In-Depth Interviews

This is when you select six to 12 key influencers in your community to interview by phone or in person, one-on-one, to get an honest understanding of public awareness and opinion about an issue. These interviews can provide insights you wouldn't necessarily obtain from a large open meeting, as the intimate setting invites more honest discourse.

Polling

Surveys are a great way to identify a baseline of awareness so you can measure success at a later date. Keep it short (less than 10 minutes), incentivize responses by offering a drawing for a gift card for those who participate, and promote in all the places where your stakeholders are, remembering to include folks from traditionally overlooked communities. Surveys should be close-ended questions so you can easily tally quantitative results.

Focus Groups

Unlike a survey, a focus group's purpose is to obtain qualitative information; to understand the "why" behind the multiple choice or yes or no questions. You are seeking to understand the deeper issues behind the opinions or assumptions people may have. The ideal sized group is 10 to 15 people. Residential customers generally prefer evenings and weekends, while business customers prefer lunchtime or early morning. Plan to provide food and if you can, offer a $100 gift card for participants. That way, you are more likely to get participants who just want the money as opposed to those who come to the focus group with a specific agenda.

Customer Panels

While you might meet with a focus group once per year, a customer panel is a group of customers you meet with on a regular basis, such as monthly or every other month. You can recruit them using an application process to ensure you have a cross-section

A Word About Town Halls

Most utilities (and local governments) are familiar with, and often turn to the traditional "town hall" style public meeting. This is characterized by your staff making a presentation to a crowd of people in audience or classroom-style seating, followed by a period of questions and answers. Sometimes, attendees are given a microphone and an opportunity to speak, with or without a time limit. This scenario is probably the least effective technique for achieving valuable public engagement. In fact, with filibustering and high emotions in this setting, results are often counterproductive.

of your service area (gender, race, ethnicity, age, geography, customer type, etc.). Host the meeting at a time and place convenient for them and build the agenda with them so that you have a chance to talk about what you want to, and they have a chance to hear about a topic they pick. Then encourage them to share what they learn with their personal networks. This is a great opportunity to have a built-in sounding board for any number of projects or initiatives your agency may be considering.

Virtual Engagement Techniques

Perhaps one silver lining of the pandemic, if there can be one, is it catalyzed more common adoption and use of various virtual meeting tools like Zoom, Teams, WebEx, and others for webinars or online meetings, focus groups, or virtual coffee chats. Each of these tools offers you a chance to meet with stakeholders in a way that's often more convenient for them. If your goal is simply to inform, then it's best to use the webinar version of these tools, which means you are disabling attendee cameras, microphones, and the chat, but still enabling questions and answers. In the Resource Library we have included tips for planning and hosting a quality virtual meeting.

TIPS FOR PLANNING AND HOSTING A VIRTUAL MEETING IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Get Your PowerPoint Ready

No matter how you engage with your community, you're going to need a strong and polished PowerPoint slide show. Think of this as your water quality stump speech – the main points about water quality you want your customers to hear. Slides should be image-rich and your talking points should be simple and easy for all audiences to understand.

Slides should cover

• Your water source(s)
• Your treatment process
• Disinfection methods
• Your sampling and monitoring methods (for what, how often)
• Data results for primary and secondary contaminants
• Staff training and credentialing

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU INCLUDE?

How to Respond When People Are Upset

When people are angry or upset, as they can become when they experience fear, they are physically incapable of acting rationally. They're only concerned about safety, so their brain tells them to either flee, freeze, fight, or fawn. That fight action is often what water utility professionals experience on social media and in town hall meetings when people are angry. Risk communication techniques can help you work through a conversation or scenario where someone is highly emotional.

[The 3-9-27 Rule]

When emotions are high, now is not the time to pummel people with information, facts, and data. Your primary goal should be to move them from an emotional state back to a rational one. Brain research reveals that most people under duress can only process about three different pieces of information that are spoken in 27 words, in nine seconds or less. That's it. We have tried to set up the messages in this Toolkit to fit that model and it also works great for social media.

Risk Communication Templates

There are effective formulas that have been developed to help you communicate effectively using the 3-9-27 Rule. These were developed by risk communication expert Vincent Covello, of the Covello Center for Risk Communication. His templates include:

Scan or click for

Covello Center for Risk Communication

The Acknowledge Action Follow-Up (AAF) Template

Use when the immediate goal is to build, maintain, or restore trust.
- **ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY MESSAGE:** Identify knowledge gaps and challenges
- **ACTION MESSAGE:** State actions you have, are or will take to address the issue. For example, the message might indicate you are cooperating with other organizations or investigating the situation
- **FOLLOW-UP MESSAGE:** Provide information on where people can obtain timely and credible information

AAF Example

ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY: The research about the risk of disinfection byproducts to human health is not clear and is even sometimes contradictory

ACTION: To protect our community from potential health concerns, our utility meets all federal and state regulations and stays current with emerging research.

FOLLOW-UP: For more information call <<phone>> or visit <<website.>>

The Caring Action Perspective (CAP) Template

Use when responding to a high-concern question or statement.
- **CARING MESSAGE:** Provide a message indicating caring, concern, empathy, or compassion. The message should communicate the seriousness of the situation
- **ACTION MESSAGE:** State actions you have, are, or will take to address the issue or problem. For example, the message might indicate you are cooperating with other organizations or investigating the situation
- **PERSPECTIVE MESSAGE:** Provide information that puts the issue in perspective or context

CAP Example

CARING CONCERN: Lead in drinking water is a legitimate public health risk, and we work every day to protect your family from lead exposure.

ACTION: One action we take is to treat our drinking water so that it lowers the risk of lead coming from household plumbing. We then test and monitor our water. Those results are reviewed by state regulators—we are open and transparent in our efforts to keep our community safe.

PERSPECTIVE OR CONTEXT: High levels of lead exposures in drinking water, like the one that occurred in Flint, MI, are often due to significant changes in source water or treatment. We are not planning any significant changes, and if we do we will let you know in advance.

More detail on these templates and a wealth of tips for communicating about all the key crisis topics utilities face can be found in AWWA's Trending in an Instant.

Scan or click for

AWWA's Trending in an Instant

How to Prepare for a Crisis

A water quality crisis can be devastating for a utility. Beyond stressing out staff and stressing your resources, your utility may receive national attention and the crisis may cause you to lose any trust or public confidence in your water you've built over time. That's why it's so important to develop, practice, and make regular updates to your utility's crisis communication plan. Here are some concepts to consider:

Your crisis communication should:

- Demonstrate your competence, that you are prepared for this, and know how to handle the situation properly
- Show compassion, that you genuinely care about the people affected and you are handling the situation humanely
- Express your concern, and that you're handling the situation expediently

The purpose of your crisis communication plan is to:

- Protect your public from further harm
- Minimize mistakes that exacerbate the situation
- Facilitate communication between your organization and its employees, customers, partners, the media, and others
- Ensure an effective and efficient response structure and chain of command for information, input, and decision making
- Contain or minimize reputation-damaging media coverage
- Ensure media coverage is as factual as possible

Your crisis communication plan should contain the following elements:

Planning and Preparation

- ◯ Plan Goals and Purpose
- ◯ Team Framework / Roles / Contact List
- ◯ Key Spaces and Equipment Needed
- ◯ Potential Crisis Topics and Threat Levels
- ◯ Message Map
- ◯ Scenarios, Key Audiences, and Key Issues of Concern
- ◯ Sample Media Questions
- ◯ Social Media Guidance / Using Social Media to Respond to a Crisis
- ◯ Media Policy
- ◯ Local/Regional Media Contact List

Operations Response Steps

- ◯ Verify What Happened
- ◯ Assess the Crisis Response Level
- ◯ Initial Notification and Assignments
- ◯ Manage Communications
- ◯ Develop/Revise Messages
- ◯ Approve/Release Messages
- ◯ Monitor and Provide Feedback

Tools

- ◯ Distribution System Maps
- ◯ Service Area Maps
- ◯ Water Quality or System Fact Sheets
- ◯ Key Sensitive Customer List (Daycares, Kidney Dialysis Centers, Hospitals, Nursing Homes)
- ◯ Mutual Aid Agreements and Contact List
- ◯ Automated Outgoing Message System (Text and Robocall)
- ◯ Overnight Accommodations (Cots, blankets, personal hygiene products, etc.)
- ◯ Key Team Phone List (Printed and Laminated)
- ◯ Emergency Contact List of Employees
- ◯ Key Team Group Chat
- ◯ Laminated Crisis Cards (Hotline Number, Website URL, Social Media Channels)
- ◯ Glossary of Terms
- ◯ Procurement Charge Codes
- ◯ Vendor List
- ◯ Utility History
- ◯ Leader Bios/Head Shots

Templates

- ◯ Holding Statement
- ◯ Press Release Sample
- ◯ Internal Reporting

SAMPLES ARE AVAILABLE IN THE RESOURCE LIBRARY

Storage and Access

The first time you develop this plan, it may be printed and bound, and placed on a shelf. But we recommend you store a digital copy on the company intranet, where sections are separate links to Word documents that can easily be updated and printed on the fly.

Key documents to keep updated and ready to print on demand include:
• Key contact list (external and internal) with cell phone, desk phone, and email addresses
• Vendor lists and contact information for supplies and support services
• Updated service area map
• Message templates

You will need a safe room for key staff to work in and meet in hourly (or as needed) for briefings.

It should have:
• Desks and chairs
• Internet and phone access
• A television that can broadcast local news and a battery-powered radio
• Flashlights, batteries, bottled water, energy bars, and blankets
• Pens and paper
• Whiteboard with dry-erase markers
• Flip chart pads and easels
• Service area maps, distribution maps, pressure zone maps, etc.
• Plenty of electric outlets

A separate room may also be needed for outside guests such as vendors, consultants, volunteers, and media with all the same supplies.

Rehearsal

It is recommended that you test and rehearse your crisis response on an annual basis. This entails setting aside a full day for all key staff who would be involved. This can be done in a conference room as a tabletop exercise.

Here are some scenarios you could use to test and rehearse your crisis response:
• Mysterious taste/odor issue (2 weeks)
• Major power outage
• Gas leak/explosion
• Water restrictions due to drought
• Water restrictions due to operational issue
• Water contamination event
• Watermain break at major intersection

NOTES

Set a meeting with staff so everyone can collaborate and learn.

SAMPLE CRISIS PLANNING MEETING AGENDA.

Overview/Why It's Needed
- Goals of crisis communication
- Roles and responsibilities
- Backups/redundancies
- No dual roles
- Preparation

Group Exercise: What Could Happen?
- Brainstorm a potential crisis and what you would do
- Report out

For Each Scenario, Discuss
- Information flow
- Operations response
- Verify
- Assess
- Communicate

Group Exercise: Scary Questions!
- Brainstorm some of the hardest questions you could be asked by customers/media and how to handle
- Report out

Tabletop Exercise
Pick a scenario from the list or think up a different one (make sure it has some likelihood). Once you have your scenario, you will need to think through (sketch it out) how it could possibly play out over the course of several days. Consider what might happen as time goes on and design your tabletop exercise around the changes that happen over time.
- Identify roles and responsibilities
- Announce the scenario
- Discuss the response – both operations and communications (what, to whom, how, by whom)
- Inject new information into the scenario; increase the complexity
- Discuss the response – both operations and communications (what, to whom, how, by whom)
- Inject a second set of new information into the scenario; increase the complexity further
- Discuss the response – both operations and communications (what, to whom, how, by whom)

Hotwash
- Review the exercise – what worked? What didn't? Let the conversation inform any changes you may need to make to your crisis communication plan

[Example]

TABLETOP EXERCISE:
A Category 5 Hurricane

Over the course of the rehearsal activity, you will want to share key details about the scenario. After each detail is shared (perhaps every 30 minutes) ask small groups to determine what's the operational response? What's the internal messaging? What do you say to customers and how? Who does what? Talk through each step as a group.

Here are some potential details you could share with your participants, over the course of the training day:

SCENARIO OPENER
On July 1, a Category 5 hurricane is forecasted for July 3, what do you do? Consider activities for July 1-3

FIRST INJECT
On July 4, At 1 am, there are 90 MPH winds and pounding rain. How is that impacting your assets, equipment, worksites, offices?

SECOND INJECT
July 4, At 4 am, there is widespread flooding (perhaps this is followed by a power outage that causes your main pump station to go down)

THIRD INJECT
A boil water alert + conservation is needed

FOURTH INJECT
On July 5, 9 am water samples positive for E.coli, boil water continues, power is restored

FIFTH INJECT
On July 6 the hurricane has cleared out; water samples are clear but there is debris all over town which slows progress, deliveries, access

SIXTH INJECT
On July 7, you can confirm second water samples are clear and water is flowing

HOTWASH
On July 8, you host a staff meeting to review actions and response as well as customer feedback. What went well? Where can you improve?

Conclusion

When it comes to a water crisis, it's not a matter of "if" but "when." Thanks to high-profile water crises like the one in Flint, MI, or Jackson, MS, you may even receive national attention. Even the best utilities can lose any trust or public confidence in their water after a crisis. But, if you develop, practice, and regularly update a crisis communication plan, that has you communicating openly and often, you will fare much better.

[Toolkit]
Resource Library

Scan or click to

Download templates and find all our Resources and References for further information.

5 Ways to Maximize the Impact of Your CCR

	Dos	Don'ts
1		
Commit to improving at least one thing in your CCR each year	• Use lots of white space and imagery of your water source, your employees, or stock photos of people enjoying water • Use at least 11-point type size • Spread the information over more pages • Use common language	• Cram lots of information onto one page • Use industry jargon • Use tiny type
2		
Include a reference or link to your CCR information on all materials	• Post the CCR as a PDF to your website • Create a series of social media posts you can use all year to let customers know it's there • Add a note on the bills • Create a bill insert for June and July • Give customers a reason to read it • Tell them where to find it • Tell them why you created it. Share how you make sure the water meets all standards • Talk about your processes in simple terms • Highlight key contaminants, especially those that have been in the news recently	• Promote the CCR once per year • Assume people know what it is or why they should read it
3		
Create a website dedicated to water quality information	• Link to All About Your Water from your home page • This page should cover all the information about your water quality from source to tap • Tell a story - Show how a drop of water makes its way from the source to someone's home and all the steps in between • Use images and video	• Create a page that just has links to this year or previous years' CCRs • Bury the page deep within your website
4		

Center water quality in all messaging and branding	• Talk about water quality outside the CCR
	• Talk about it all year on social media
	• Dedicate a portion of all core presentations you make to community members
	• Talk about water quality when you talk about
	  • Infrastructure projects
	  • Rate increases
	  • Vacancies you have
	  • New employees you've hired
	  • An award your utility has won
		• Forget that water quality is a core element of your brand

5		
If you don't know what your customers think of your utility and your water, ask them	• Periodically ask customers what they think about the water • Use tips in the section called Understanding Your Audiences for how to get their input	• Assume your customers know you, trust you, like your water

Design Templates (Guidance and Samples)

BILL INSERT

FACT SHEET

CONSUMER CONFIDENCE REPORTS TEMPLATES

Water Quality Message Maps

Here you'll find messaging on a number of water quality issues. These message maps aren't for use in the CCR; these are for when you communicate about water quality outside the CCR, such as in social media, advertising, brochures, presentations, articles, etc. These messages have largely been sourced from the EPA and VDH, and then modified lightly for clarity and accessibility for all audiences. Some of these messages will need further customization from you but most are ready to be copied and pasted right into your materials. When possible, these have been written as one key point with three sub "proof" points. They are intentionally brief so that they're more memorable and easy to understand. Rest assured these have been review by Virginia's Office of Drinking Water Staff.

CATEGORY	KEY MESSAGE	PROOF POINT 1	PROOF POINT 2	PROOF POINT 3
General				
The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA)	The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) is the federal law that sets the quality standards for drinking water.	Passed originally in 1974, its primary purpose is to protect public health.	The Act authorizes the EPA to set maximum limits on contaminants that may be present in drinking water.	State health departments work with water systems to ensure they meet these standards.
Sampling and Monitoring	The SDWA requires water utilities to monitor for more than 100 contaminants on a regular basis.	Last year alone, we collected X samples and performed Y laboratory tests to ensure the water we collect, treat, and deliver to your home or business meets all standards.	You can find all the data we collect on your water at our website at www. INSERT SITE.org or call us at INSERT NUMBER for a copy of our annual water quality report.	
How EPA Develops Water Quality Standards	EPA sets national standards for drinking water.	Two factors that influence how the standards are set are whether technologies exist to detect and treat the contaminant and the cost of installing these technologies.	The standard includes an enforceable maximum level of contaminant and requires ways the utility must treat the water to remove the contaminant.	Standards are set in three steps: **1.** EPA identifies and studies contaminants in drinking water that may harm public health. **2.** EPA sets a goal for the maximum level of contaminants it decides to regulate. Below this goal, level there is no known or expected risk to public health. **3.** EPA sets the maximum permissible level of a contaminant.

CATEGORY	KEY MESSAGE	PROOF POINT 1	PROOF POINT 2	PROOF POINT 3
General, continued				
The Candidate Contaminant List (CCL)	The Contaminant Candidate List (CCL) is a list published every five years of drinking water contaminants that are known to occur or anticipated to occur in drinking water systems but do not yet have an EPA-set standard.	Once the CCL is published, EPA must determine whether or not to regulate at least five contaminants from the list.	EPA decides this by evaluating data on all the contaminants. The ones that pose a risk to public health and are likely to be found in water are usually the ones that are chosen to be regulated.	Health advisories identify the level of a contaminant where there is no known risk to public health. They are not enforceable.
An EPA Maximum Contaminant Level vs a Health Advisory	A maximum contaminant level (MCL) is the maximum amount of a contaminant the EPA will allow.	The MCL is enforceable by state agencies. If this level is exceeded, the water may pose a risk to public health and the utility is required to take action and to notify customers.	A Health Advisory provides guidance and information on contaminants that can may be in drinking water and may affect public health but are not currently regulated.	
EPA's Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule	The EPA's Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule (UCMR) is a part of the Safe Drinking Water Act. It requires water utilities to collect data on contaminants in drinking water that are not yet regulated.	The data we collect helps EPA determine whether they should issue new regulations for particular contaminants to protect public health.	We closely follow new information, health advisories and regulatory changes on all emerging and unregulated contaminants, and we change our protocols when necessary.	One example of this is...
Home filters or point of use filters	The water we deliver to your home meets all federal and state standards for drinking water and is safe to drink.	But we know that some people like the added peace of mind, or the enhanced taste that a home filter can provide.	If you choose to use a home water filter, be sure to get one that is independently certified. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for maintenance.	Maintaining your device properly is important because a filter that is not maintained can increase your exposure to contaminants.
Bottled water	We know that some like the enhanced taste and convenience that bottled water can provide, even though it often costs 1,000 times more than water from your kitchen faucet.	And, in emergencies, when we can't safely deliver water to your home, bottled water is often the back up.	The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires bottled water quality to be equal to tap water, but once the water is bottled, the quality cannot be monitored again and bottled water usually does not contain fluoride.	If you buy bottled water, store it in a cool, dry place, out of direct sunlight, and dispose of it after the expiration date, which is usually after one to two years.

CATEGORY	KEY MESSAGE	PROOF POINT 1	PROOF POINT 2
Lead and Copper			
General	Lead is most commonly found in pipes and plumbing of homes built before 1951.	If present in high levels, lead can cause serious health problems, especially for pregnant women and young children.	If your home was built prior to 1951, or pipes were installed prior to 1987, or you installed brass fixtures prior to 2014, you may want to have your water tested for lead.
Customer Responsibility	When the water in your indoor plumbing sits idle for a long time – such as when you take a vacation – and if you have lead or copper plumbing, those metals can start to seep into the water.	If you've been away for a while, we advise that you run your water on full blast for 30 seconds to two minutes before using it for drinking or cooking. This clears your internal plumbing of the old, stale water, and pulls fresher water into your home from the system.	
Lead Standards	EPA has not set an MCL for lead. Instead, it has set an Action Level of 15 parts per billion for the 90th percentile of sample results.	A water system exceeds the Action Level for lead if 10% of samples (one out of 10) exceed 15 parts per billion.	If 10% of our samples exceed 15 parts per billion, then we would be in violation of the SDWA and we would notify all our customers and be required to take immediate action to fix it.
Lead and Copper Monitoring	Explain how often you sample, where, and how you select sampling locations.		
Actions We're Taking (Inventories/ removals, investments, etc.)	To be filled in by the water system		
Fluoride			
Fluoride	Fluoride, a naturally occurring mineral, is added to your drinking water to help prevent tooth decay.	Adding fluoride to water has been a common practice by most utilities over the last 75 years.	According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this practice is the single most effective measure to prevent tooth decay, which is one of the most common childhood diseases. For more information about the benefits of fluoride, visit https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/index.html.
Waterborne Microorganisms			
The Surface Water Treatment Rule	The Surface Water Treatment Rule applies to all public water systems that receive their water from surface sources (lakes, streams, rivers) or ground water sources that may be exposed to surface water.	This Rule requires most water systems to filter and disinfect water that has come from surface water sources or groundwater that's exposed to surface water.	This Rule also identifies the Maximum Contaminant Level Goals (MCLGs) for viruses, bacteria, and Giardia lamblia.
Cryptosporidium and Giardia lamblia	Cryptosporidium and Giardia are parasites that cause stomach illness and diarrhea. Cryptosporidium and Giardia are not present in the treated drinking water we supply to you.	They are commonly found in local waters and are usually removed in the treatment process.	We test the water for their presence before it leaves the treatment plant.

CATEGORY	KEY MESSAGE	PROOF POINT 1	PROOF POINT 2
Waterborne Microorganisms, continued			
E. Coli	E. Coli is a bacteria that's naturally present in local waters. It generally comes from animal poop, and it can make people quite sick if ingested. E. Coli is not present in the treated drinking water we supply to you.	We test your treated water for E. Coli [XXXX] (daily, weekly, etc.) to ensure our treatment and disinfection are removing them.	If we find E. Coli present in the treated water, it means our treated water supply has an exposure to the outside somewhere, and we will issue a Boil Water Advisory until we can fix it and two consecutive samples come back negative.
Legionella	Legionella is bacteria that can grow in home, office, or industrial hot water heaters, storage tanks, pipes, hot tubs, and cooling towers, in certain conditions, such as when the water sits for long periods of time.	Legionella is not present in the treated drinking water we supply to you. Your exposure is limited to plumbing equipment that has held standing water at warmer temperatures for a period of time.	Legionella causes Legionnaire's Disease, a pneumonia-like sickness. It is caught when someone breathes in water mist that contains the bacteria.
		Most healthy adults can survive Legionnaire's Disease, with minor to moderate symptoms, but the health risks increase if you are over 50, are or were a smoker and are male.	If you suspect Legionella contamination or would like more information about the risk of Legionella, contact your local health department.
Contaminants of Emerging Concern			
Disinfection Byproducts	Chlorine is often used to disinfect drinking water and we use it, too. However, in very few cases, as chlorine breaks down in the water, it can react with other matter and form another class of chemicals known as Disinfection Byproducts, or DBPs, which are known to cause cancer at high levels.	There are two types of DBPs, haloacetic acids (HAAS) and trihalomethanes (THS). Because both of these can cause cancer at high amounts, EPA has set a limit for HAAS of XX and THS of YYY in drinking water.	We sample and monitor for DBPs INSERT FREQUENCY, and usually find INSERT AMOUNT. On occasion, we might see a data point above the MCL, but a temporary or single spike in DBPs is not harmful to public health.
PFAS	PFAS is short for Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances. They are known as the forever chemicals because the properties that make them so useful to us in products, such as their nonstick properties, are also what make them so dangerous, because they stay put and can accumulate over time.	Though PFAS are found in water at low amounts, your exposure to them in water is much lower than your exposure to them through other household products such as carpets, clothing, microwavable popcorn bags, makeup, and nonstick pots and pans.	We are closely following the emerging research about PFAS and public health. Additional information about PFAS and drinking water can be found on the Virginia Department of Health's website at www.vdh.virginia.gov.

CATEGORY	KEY MESSAGE	PROOF POINT 1	PROOF POINT 2
Taste, Odor, and Looks			
General	Cloudy or colored water, or even water that tastes off or has an odor, can cause a great number of people to unnecessarily stop using water from their tap.	But taste, color, and odor are usually not a risk to public health.	**Refer to messages about cloudy water/odors**
Hardness	"Hard" water is water with high levels of minerals, often calcium and magnesium.	At certain levels, the hardness of water may interfere with the cleaning ability of soaps and detergents and may cause minerals to deposit on dishes, appliances, and plumbing fixtures.	EPA has not set a standard for hardness because it does not create a health issue. Follow appliance maintenance instructions for removing any deposits (scaling).
Pink film around faucets	A red or pink stain often seen around faucets, drains, and in toilets, is caused by a bacteria (Serratia marcescens).	This bacteria does not come from the drinking water; it grows naturally in moist areas.	Keeping surfaces dry, and cleaning them regularly, will help control it.
Cloudiness (Turbidity)	Cloudy water, referred to as "turbidity," is not a health concern, but it's something we monitor in the source water, as it can be an indicator of something else.	If water from your kitchen faucet is cloudy or milky, it usually means there is air in the water.	Setting the glass aside for a few minutes should allow the air bubbles to settle out, and the water should be clear. If it isn't contact us.
Rotten Egg Smell	A rotten egg smell from the bathroom faucet is usually not the water, but the smell of items (hair, soap, toothpaste) that have collected in the p-trap of the sink.	To determine whether it's the water, fill a glass and take it into another room and smell it. If the rotten egg smell is still there, contact us.	If the rotten egg smell only comes from your faucet, try clearing the p-trap of gunk and debris, then let the water run for a bit and see if the smell is gone. If not, call us.
Chlorine Taste/Odor	A chlorine taste or odor is completely normal because we use chlorine to disinfect the water.	The chlorine is added at a level safe enough for you, but strong enough to kill bacteria. The scent can be stronger in the spring when we switch to a stronger form of chlorine.	Filling a pitcher, and storing it uncovered in your fridge, will allow the chlorine taste and odor to settle out.
Musty Smell or Taste	A musty smell or taste is often due to excessive algae growth in the source of the water.	While this does not have a health impact, it can make the water unpleasant to drink.	Excess algae is often caused when fertilizer is washed into the drinking water source. This can happen by an accidental spill, or when heavy rains carry excess fertilizer from lawns and farms into the water supply.

Photo and Video Guidance

Imagery is a core part of your communication. It's essential for storytelling and connecting with audiences. Today, it's easier than ever to capture testimonials and storytelling opportunities through smartphones and computers from anywhere in the world.

Free Photos and Stock Photos

[QR code] unsplash.com   [QR code] pexels.com   [QR code] freepik.com

To Take Your Own Photos and Videos:
The following tips will help ensure you capture quality photos and videos.

HORIZONTAL ORIENTATION
While still images can be taken either vertically or horizontally, you need to record videos horizontally. This provides the best opportunity to crop an image to best match the space.

POSITIONING - CENTERED AND STANDING
Individuals should center themselves in the middle of the shot and they should be standing because we naturally tend to slouch when we sit. Position the camera to capture the speaker from between the belly button and just below the shoulder and make sure there is a little bit of space at the top of the frame. That provides an opportunity to crop the image if needed.

WHERE TO LOOK
Always have subjects look straight into the camera.

PROP YOUR CAMERA
To avoid a shaky video, we recommend you use a stand rather than hold your camera by hand.

LIGHTING
Use as much natural light on the face as possible but do watch out for harsh backlighting that will make the subject hard to see.

SOUND
Be sure to record in a quiet area (or use a mic if you can) to ensure that there are no distracting noises that may interfere with the sound (i.e., traffic).

LOCATION
Look for opportunities to film outdoors or near a window. Natural lighting is best but if the outside is noisy, indoors works great, too. Just note the background and avoid areas that have an overall busy background or pattern.

WARDROBE
Like your background, your wardrobe should be simple. Avoid heavy graphical patterns and avoid clothing with logos on the front unless it's your utility's logo.

FORMAT
To ensure a high-quality video, we recommend you set your phone to record in HD 1920x1080. This may yield a large file. If you need to email your video, free transfer services such as WeTransfer or DropBox can help.

TIMING
Aim for about 90 seconds or less for the video.

Crisis Communication Plan Templates

Holding Statement Sample

<div style="border">

For Immediate Release
Contact: INSERT CONTACT NAME, XXX-XXX-XXXX

INSERT INCIDENT TYPE AT INSERT UTILITY NAME INSERT LOCATION

At approximately XX PM/AM today, we are currently investigating BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF EVENT (spill, accident, etc.) at INSERT LOCATION. We are working to determine (damage, injuries, impacts). At this time, we have confirmed that INSERT ANY FACTUAL INFORMATION YOU CAN ABSOLUTELY CONFIRM. DELETE THIS SENTENCE IF NOTHING CAN BE CONFIRMED. The safety and wellbeing of our employees, contractors and customers is our number one priority. INSERT EXPRESSION OF COMPASSION (our thoughts are with the families of those affected.) As more information is available, we will provide updates through INSERT MEANS (website) and regular media briefings, which will be held at INSERT LOCATION at INSERT TIME (every hour on the hour).

</div>

Press Release Sample

<div style="border">

Water Shortage/Potential Contamination

INSERT UTILITY NAME ISSUES MANDATORY CONSERVATION FOR INSERT AFFECTED NEIGHBORHOOD

INSERT COUNTY/CITY/TOWN, INSERT STATE. (INSERT DATE) – INSERT UTILITY NAME today issued a mandatory conservation notice for customers in the INSERT NEIGHBORHOOD AFFECTED area to reduce water consumption due to an INSERT REASON in the SOURCES OF SUPPLY, which resulted in the shutdown of the company's water treatment plant. INSERT UTILITY NAME operators shut down the plant prior to any IMPACT TO the treatment process. The quality of customers' drinking water is not affected, but the plant will remain shut down until INSERT ACTIVITY and it's safe to restart the plant.

Customers are asked to reduce their non-essential water use until the issue is corrected and the conservation requirements are lifted. This notice affects approximately INSERT NUMBER customers.

INSERT UTILITY NAME has notified the INSERT PUBLIC HEALTH REGULATORY AGENCY about the incident. The cause of the INSERT ISSUE is (INSERT CAUSE OR) under investigation.

Customers will be notified when the mandatory conservation notice is lifted, and updates will be provided through the INSERT UTILITY NAME website at INSERT URL, under the INSERT WHERE section. For more information, contact customer service center at INSERT NUMBER.

INSERT COMPANY BOILERPLATE

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Internal Reporting Template

Date/Time _____ Office/Location _____

What Do We Know?

_____

_____

_____

What Don't We Know?

_____

_____

_____

What Media Coverage/What Are They Asking?

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What Are The Key Messages And Supporting Info?

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Who Have We Spoken To?

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_____

What Have We Said?

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_____

How to Create A Strategic Communications Plan

The difference between being tactical and strategic is research, planning, and measurement. A tactical approach is when you size things up based on instinct or "from the hip" thinking, trying some ideas, and hoping something sticks. Tactical can also mean just doing what's convenient or familiar to you.

Being strategic is about being intentional and deliberate about the choices you make for communications strategies and tactics. They are rooted in research. They are tailored for the audience. They are measurable.
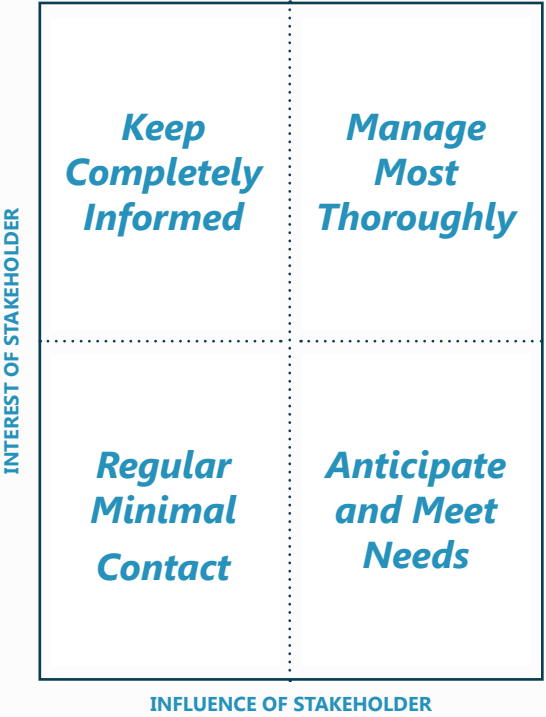
Here is an annotated outline of a Strategic Communication Plan adapted from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) that you can use to create one that's customized. Note it begins with a problem statement. This can only be articulated after you've done some research to fully understand the situation.

Research:

Here are some key questions to guide your planning.
Use this information to fill out the rest of the plan.

- What are the demographics of your service area?
- Who are your stakeholders? Get more specific than "customers"
- Plot them on this grid based on their interest in water quality and their influence in the community over public opinion. Pay close attention to and prioritize communication and engagement with the folks in the upper right quadrant.
- What do the people in your service area care about most? What evidence do you have to support that?
- What is your organization's reputation? How do you know?
- What is the last big news article or social media coverage about your organization? What kind of reaction did it receive from your stakeholders and why do you think so?
- When is the last time you announced a big project, or a rate increase or major policy change and how did it go?
- What are people saying about your water quality? How do you know?
- What are some of the key issues your community is grappling with right now? Is water part of that? How so?
- Who do people in your community trust for information?
- Where do people get their information? And where do they prefer to get it? How do you know?

STAKEHOLDER MAP: WHO NEEDS WHAT?

Keep Completely Informed	*Manage Most Thoroughly*
Regular Minimal Contact	*Anticipate and Meet Needs*

INTEREST OF STAKEHOLDER (vertical axis)

INFLUENCE OF STAKEHOLDER (horizontal axis)

Planning:

PROBLEM STATEMENT: (Based on what you learned in the research, try to articulate in a few sentences what is the issue your plan is trying to address.)

GOAL: (Write an overarching statement of what you are trying to do. This should address the problem.)

AUDIENCES: (Based on your stakeholder mapping exercise, who needs to know, who should be involved, whose support do you need, and who will be impacted?) Do not forget your staff as a key audience!
Example: Moms of elementary-aged children and younger

OBJECTIVES: What level of awareness, attitude, or action do you want to achieve? These should be measurable, so make sure each one measures a change, an attitude, behavior, or piece of knowledge, and has a time frame for success. It's helpful to have different objectives for different segments of your audience.
Example: In 12 months, 60% of those surveyed will know that PFAS are not found in our water.

STRATEGIES: (How will you meet the objectives you listed? You may want one to three strategies for each one, pending the budget and resources you can devote.)
Example: Presentations about water quality offered to Moms groups in service area

MESSAGING: (What are your key messages? What facts do you have to support them as proof points?)

TACTICS: (What materials do you need to create to carry out your strategies and meet objectives?)

BUDGET: (What resources – people, money, software, vendors, etc. – do you need to accomplish your objectives?)

Implementation:

TIMETABLE AND TASK LIST: (Who does what when?)
We have inserted at the end of this section an Excel template you can use to map out each task, the person responsible, and the date due.

EVALUATION: (How will you know you have done a good job? Hint: Your objectives should tell you.)

How to Host a Quality Virtual Meeting

Planning:

One of the biggest differences between an online meeting and one that's held in person is the ability to read the nonverbal communication of attendees, which can account for most of the communication that happens during meetings. It's much easier to read the room in person and pick up on discomfort, discord, or consensus. This becomes a challenge when the meeting is done virtually. Therefore, you must very intentionally plan for check-ins during an online meeting. This is just one of the many aspects of an online meeting that requires careful planning. Here is a checklist of items to run through so you are fully prepared:

KNOW AHEAD OF TIME, WHAT YOUR PURPOSE IS, AND PLAN THE CONTENT AROUND THAT
Determine what is the purpose of the meeting. What do you want the outcome to be? What will success look like? Are you simply presenting information? Asking for a decision? Seeking input toward a decision? This should influence how you structure your presentation and be clearly stated in invites to the meeting and at the start of the presentation.

KNOW AND TEST YOUR PLATFORM
Determine what platform or software will be used (WebEx, GoToMeeting, Zoom, Teams, etc.) and make sure you know all the features, how to log in, and how to use it, paying special attention to how your audience will engage. For example, is there a raise hand option? Chat box? Whiteboard? Make sure you know how all that works so you can explain it well to participants. Note: there is a trick to sharing your screen and being able to view the chat simultaneously in Teams. You'll want to know how to do that and practice it.

ARE YOU SHARING VIDEOS?
If you are planning to be on video, dress as you would for an in-person meeting and remember to set your camera at eye level, so you are looking straight across to it, and look directly at the camera.

WHAT FEEDBACK IS DESIRED?
Determine with the client what type of feedback they need so you can devise some questions to ask the elected body or attendees for that input. Incorporate these questions directly into the slides.

WHO IS DOING WHAT?
Determine in advance who's doing what. Here are the main meeting roles:
- **HOST:** Controls the meeting software. Starts the meeting. Moves the slides.
- **FACILITATOR:** Welcomes and greets the participants. Takes roll (if appropriate). Reviews how to use the tool and participate in the meeting. Introduces guests. Watches the chat and prompts questions. Sometimes the Host and Facilitator are the same person.
- **PANELIST/PRESENTER:** This is typically you as the presenter. You may either be asked to "take control" and move your slides yourself, or you can ask the Host or Facilitator to do it for you.
- **PARTICIPANT:** Those who attend the meeting.

HOW WILL FEEDBACK BE RECEIVED?
Find out how participant input will be taken, whether they will ask panelists/presenters to use chat, call on individuals, use the raise hand tool, etc.

WHAT IF TECHNOLOGY FAILS?
Always be prepared to do your presentation without computers and go strictly by phone, in case of a technology failure. This means, all participants need to have a copy of the presentation in advance, your host and facilitator have a copy of your talking points and prompts for discussion, and your participants (whether elected officials alone or elected officials and the public) have a clear way to participate.

This may mean that the host stops the presentation at predetermined points and prompts each elected official by name for questions or comments. It may also require that members of the public have submitted questions (or their desire to ask a question) in advance, and the host calls on them in the order their request was received.

WHAT LAWS ARE AT PLAY?
Prior to the meeting, have your attorney check your state's public meeting laws. These guide what constitutes a public meeting, how documents (records) are shared, what constitutes a record, and much more.

Practice:

- **BY YOURSELF** – Once you've completed your slide deck, practice going through it with your computer's camera on, to get comfortable with the material, get comfortable looking into the camera as you talk, check slide legibility, and time yourself.
- **WITH TECHNOLOGY** – If there's an opportunity to actually use the online meeting software you will use for the meeting, then a few days before the meeting, invite a colleague to watch you as you practice to offer feedback and enable you to work out any kinks.
- **WITH THE PRESENTATION TEAM** – Once you are confident in your part, schedule a meeting a day or two prior to the presentation to run through everything with your team, including the host, facilitator, and IT person.

Set the Mood

- **CHECK YOUR SPACE** – Make sure the space you will be in for the presentation is one with limited noise and disturbance and has adequate lighting. Clear the room. If you are working from home, give your roommates or family a heads up so they know you will be unavailable and need quiet for the meeting timeframe. If you're in an office, consider reserving a conference room to minimize interruptions and noise.
- **TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS** – Close out of all other programs (including IMs) and turn off notifications so your computer and cell phone are not buzzing or dinging during your meeting.
- **CHECK LIGHTING** – Do not sit with a window behind you or next to you, as that may make your face difficult to see.
- **FOCUS CAMERA** – Center your face and body in the camera frame.
- **SEND A NOTE** – For smaller stakeholder meetings, one day before the meeting, consider sending an email to the attendees to give them some notice of how things will go for the meeting. Let them know you will share your camera and hope they do too, though it's not required. Let them know of any tips for using the software and that they will need to click the link to join in order to see your screen or presentation, as opposed to just dialing from the phone.
- **SEND A REMINDER** – Everyone's lives are busy, so a friendly reminder that the session is coming up soon will help boost participation.

During the Meeting

- **OPEN EARLY** – Launch your meeting at least 15 to 20 minutes ahead of the scheduled meeting start time to give you a chance to test software issues, run through the order of the agenda, click through the PowerPoint, and practice handing off screen share if applicable. You can also help attendees troubleshoot their connection.
- **TAKE ROLL** – If this is your role, you can do this a couple of ways. One way is to check the participant list in the tool to see who is on and then call roll for others you don't see or can't recognize by their handle. Or, you can run down each name on your invite list. Then ask if there is anyone whose name you did not call.
- **HELP GUESTS PARTICIPATE** – If this is your role, begin by orienting the attendees to the software. Run through the control bar and show them how to mute and unmute, raise their hand, and use the chat function. Encourage their participation by chat to ask questions or make comments. Let them know the chat will be saved. If you are planning to record the call, this is the time to hit record. Make sure everyone knows you will be recording so they can opt-out at this point if they are not comfortable with it.
- **SET EXPECTATIONS** – If your camera is on, let participants know that your eye contact may stray on occasion as you check the chat box, take notes and review talking points. Also ask that attendees turn off any computer or phone notifications to limit noise, and mute themselves when not talking. Let them know you will prompt them with questions and that they will all have a chance to be heard. Some people will not feel comfortable just jumping in, so you may need to call on attendees by name to ask if they have anything to add.
  - **FACILITATE UNDERSTANDING** – You will likely need to speak a little slower than you normally do, and pause a little longer between slides to give listeners a chance to hear you and process the info. Use these pauses to periodically check the chat box and answer questions.
  Do not sweat some silence.
  - **CHECK THE CHAT** – Once you finish your presentation, review the chat box to make sure there are no questions left unanswered. Make a note of any questions you need to research to answer.
  - **SUMMARIZE NEXT STEPS** – Before you say thank you and goodbye, summarize any action items that came up and what your next steps will be. Invite participants to reach out directly to you with any further questions and commit to a deadline to respond back.

Post-meeting

- Send a follow-up note to participants, thank them for attending, respond to questions that went unanswered, and provide another thing they can attend to continue engagement.
- It's easier to deepen relationships with people you've already engaged with rather than reach new people. Use this participant list as a basis for future outreach events.
- Was it recorded? If so, post the recording on your social media accounts and your website.

NOTES

References and Resources

[QR code image]

Scan or click to

Download templates and find all our Resources and References for further information.

General Drinking Water Quality

EPA OFFICE OF DRINKING WATER
www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water

VIRGINIA OFFICE OF DRINKING WATER
www.vdh.virginia.gov/drinking-water/

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION DRINKING WATER
www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/index.html

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- City of Norfolk Utilities
- Fairfax Water
- Frederick Water
- Loudoun Water
- Lynchburg Virginia Utilities
- Town of Leesburg Utilities
- Virginia American Water
- Virginia Beach Utilities

END NOTES

[1] https://theconversation.com/nearly-60-million-americans-dont-drink-their-tap-water-research-suggests-heres-why-thats-a-public-health-problem-158483

[2] Mistrust at the tap? Factors contributing to public drinking water (mis)perception across US households

[3] https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/water-utilities-anchor-institutions

[4] https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S095717871930030X?token=914E5E94D2F9B9ACEAFD81CD9179C1BDA3B26B4B913721A76FE3D49B1BFDEB8DFA9202C6C5BDBEE4E1B45ED105438EA1&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20221206211344

[5] Morning Consult's *2021 Public Perceptions of Tap Water Survey*

[6] Customer Experience Insight *(www.customerexperienceinsight.com/,)* which is a platform for customer service tips, tools and techniques