LET’S TALK ABOUT IT: HOW TO IMPLEMENT A SUCCESSFUL SPEAKERS BUREAU AS PART OF A FOCUSED PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORT

Lesley S. Robin, Katz & Associates, Inc., San Diego, CA
Marsi A. Steirer, Deputy Director, City of San Diego Water Department, San Diego, CA

Introduction

In early 2004, the San Diego City Council directed the City’s Water Department to implement a one-year study researching all the ways that recycled water use could be increased in the City. A six-member team of employees was assembled, representing a variety of technical and administrative fields. The team joined ranks with the environmental engineering firm already working on the update to the Water Department’s Water Reuse Master Plan. The two efforts were rolled into one and strategies developed to accomplish the Water Reuse Study 2005 (Study). The Study team will prepare and present a detailed report to the City Council in 2005.

A major effort of the Study was a multi-faceted public outreach effort to inform the public about the Study and the potential water reuse options available to the City. A key component was to use a Speakers Bureau to address as many community groups as possible within the Study’s timeframe. All community presentations needed to be concluded and documented within 15 to 18 months from the onset of the Study for inclusion in the final report to the City Council. The Water Department’s Speakers Bureau was coordinated by a community relations consultant working onsite with the City team who quickly began to develop and implement a focused program about the Water Reuse Study.

Water Reuse Study Speakers Bureau Goals

Geographic area to be covered
It was critical to the Speakers Bureau program that as much of the City be reached with a presentation on the Study as possible. Presentations in each of the eight City Council districts needed to occur in order to present a list of groups contacted in each Councilmember’s area in the final report. Seeing a list of groups located in each district would help each Councilmember know that representative groups of his/her constituents had been reached with the Study information and that they had been given the opportunity to provide feedback to the Study team.

Demographics of groups to be reached
The Study team felt that identifying and reaching a broad group of San Diegans would be equally, if not more important, as reaching a broad geographic area with the Study’s information and message. Including minority, ethnic, community action, business, educational, and civic/social groups would aid in demonstrating to the City Council that a wide range of residents; including marginalized populations, had been reached with information about the Study’s six water reuse options.
Feedback and evaluation to be collected

Documentation of comments and questions from each audience reached by the Speakers Bureau would be summarized and included in the Study’s final report to the City Council. Documentation of the specific comments and questions would be available in an addendum to the report. Each speaker was instructed to document the questions and comments from the audience on each presentation worksheet. These were then entered electronically into the Study’s files and the information categorized by topic, i.e. questions about recycled water treatment technology, availability in the service area, and comparisons with the costs of desalinated seawater.

Planning Steps

The following sections of this paper will provide suggestions for implementing and managing a successful Speakers Bureau program focusing on a single topic. Examples from the City of San Diego’s Water Reuse Study will be included where appropriate and useful to the reader. The term “project” will be used to describe a hypothetical program or project needing public outreach activities.

Establish a Speakers Bureau Coordinator

It is essential to have one person designated as the Coordinator for a focused Speakers Bureau effort. Larger organizations may already have a full or part-time Speakers Bureau Coordinator to fill this function. However, this individual may serve many departments. The time needed to devote to an intense effort should be evaluated, if a project is to be added to that existing workload. The Coordinator does not necessarily need to be a highly polished public speaker but should have moderate experience in public speaking. However, solid experience in community outreach and public affairs is essential if the effort is to succeed. Additionally, very strong organizational skills will be necessary. The designated Coordinator may devote all or part of the work time to the Speakers Bureau effort, depending on the scope of the project and the funding.

A separate telephone line with voice mail messaging should be established for the Speakers Bureau. The line may need to be subject specific if the Coordinator will be focusing only on a single project. Additionally, an e-mail account should be established specifically for this project, i.e. “Water Reuse Study Speakers Bureau.” These two items are essential for soliciting speaking engagements and in working through the logistics for each presentation. If an existing employee has added on the Coordinator duties, having a separate phone and e-mail address helps manage the workload and also lets other employees access and handle these messages in the Coordinator’s absence.

The Coordinator’s workspace will likely become the storage area for presentation materials: posters, easels, bulk copies of audience handouts and the audio visual equipment. When there are several speakers, one area containing all the supplies helps when gathering materials before a presentation, which often occurs in a rush.

Select and train the speakers

The next step is to secure speakers to present the information. With the Water Reuse Study, all members of the Study team were asked to be speakers. Ultimately, four of the six Study team members regularly gave presentations, with the Speakers Bureau Coordinator substituting when
necessary. Experience with public speaking is extremely helpful; however “learning by doing” can also be effective if there are staff available to provide continued training, evaluation and coaching until presentation skills are more advanced.

A professional public speaking coach can be brought in to perform a group training for all speakers if the Coordinator is not trained to do this. However, there are many materials available at no cost that can be utilized to conduct an in-house training if the Coordinator has moderate experience in public speaking. Training materials should include tips on speaking styles, body language, appearance, visual aids, using notes, handling questions, gauging the audience, establishing rapport, etc. If speakers have not used PowerPoint presentations in the past, training on how to use the required equipment will be needed. Speakers should be able to operate the computer and projector themselves, using a remote control if possible, avoiding the need for an “assistant” to go along and operate the computer during each presentation.

After the group training, one-on-one training for each speaker with the Coordinator should occur. A helpful way to get started is to ask the speaker to talk extemporaneously for five minutes about a favorite hobby or interest. This can be video-taped if possible; although this is not a requirement. The Coordinator can take notes on a presentation skills checklist and provide personal feedback with the speaker on the quality of the talk. The speaker should also do a self-evaluation, using the same form. This allows a comfortable, private, and balanced critiquing session for the speaker. This can be repeated again in a few days with a new topic, to gauge improvement, if needed.

When a new speaker goes out for a presentation, the Coordinator should go as an observer for several occasions, using the same presentation skills checklist and then provide this to the speaker after the presentation. A checklist is especially helpful if the Coordinator is critiquing a speaker that has a supervisory role over the Coordinator, because it avoids any awkwardness in giving negative or “needs improvement” feedback face-to-face. The Coordinator should periodically go out with each speaker to make observations and give feedback on message delivery, speaking style and the question and answer period. Taking digital photos on these occasions is also helpful as they can be used for collateral project materials, on a website or in promotional flyers.

**Develop the “canned” presentation**

While the training effort is on-going, a “canned” presentation on the project should be developed. A PowerPoint presentation format allows the most flexibility for updating and portability in community settings, as long as the speaker can provide the laptop computer and projector. If a public opinion survey or focus group has been conducted in conjunction with the project, this feedback is helpful in addressing these issues in the presentation. Additionally, language and terminology can be used which has already been tested with the public.

The Speakers Bureau should utilize an experienced graphic designer and public affairs professional to assist in developing a presentation with strong message points, high visual appeal, easily understood text, clear photographs and charts, and terminology geared toward a generalized audience. Additional slides to elaborate on certain points can be added for more technical audiences. The notes section of each slide can provide key facts for the speaker to use if questions are asked pertaining to that point. The length of the presentation should be tested
with speakers to achieve the estimated time allowed for presentations, which is likely to be 15-20 minutes.

If additional photographs are needed for the PowerPoint, it is usually possible to locate a skilled amateur among staff to take more photos. Polished looking photos in the slides can greatly enhance its appeal and an electronic photo software program can further create a professional look. Avoid the standardized backgrounds provided by presentation programs and either create new backgrounds or purchase ones that aren’t so easily recognizable. Also, avoid downloadable “stock” photos and be knowledgeable about copyright laws applying to using photos from others’ internet websites.

During the final stages of development, the PowerPoint draft presentation should be tested in front of staff members not associated with the project or familiar with the content to see if the “message” comes across or if there is terminology that isn’t understood. Asking these individuals to write down a “key message” that they received is also helpful and provides a concrete and anonymous way to give feedback to the presentation development staff.

**Research and contact potential audiences**
This aspect of a Speakers Bureau generally takes the most staff time and effort as new audiences must continually be located and secured throughout the project’s timeframe to meet the public outreach goals. It is important to attempt to locate groups that have meeting agendas that allow time for speakers. Speaking to groups that are already formed and have regular meetings allows speakers to enter a setting where the audience generally is already comfortable with the location and with others in the audience. In the case of community planning groups or councils, the Board of officers will be acquainted with each other, even though the audience may vary from meeting to meeting.

The time allowed for a speaker can range from five minutes to one hour. The Water Reuse Study Speakers Bureau found that the average time allowed for a presentation was 20 minutes, plus five minutes for questions and answers.

Locating the correct program scheduler or chairperson for a group and their contact information can be an involved process; but with perseverance, the correct person can usually be found. Website information is often helpful, as for organized community planning groups or large special interest organizations. A directory of local organizations may also exist. In some situations, phone calls to one group representative can lead to securing a mailing list of other groups.

Administrative support staff can be brought in to assist in this aspect of the Speakers Bureau. E-mail and hard-copy solicitation texts, along with a promotional flyer, should be used as promotions may occur by e-mail or regular mail. A telephone script for requesting the appropriate contact information can help support staff become comfortable with making “cold calls.” Correctly tracking which groups have received presentations is essential so that they are not accidentally included in future solicitation mailings or contact calls. Informing the support staff when requests come in for presentations is one way to maintain enthusiasm about this aspect of the Speakers Bureau management.
The following is a sample of groups that can be contacted for presentations:

- Community Planning Groups (if independent from the local or municipal planning division)
- Community or Neighborhood Councils
- Neighborhood Crime Watch groups
- Special interest groups (such as environmental protection, taxpayers’ rights)
- Business and professional organizations
- Employee groups of large community businesses or organizations
- Civic and social groups (service or charitable clubs)
- School boards, parent/teacher associations and youth sports associations
- University classes
- Homeowners associations

Promotional flyers can be mailed or hand-delivered to community service centers, libraries and other prominent local settings where community-minded residents might frequent.

**Utilize referrals from project stakeholders**

Utilizing referrals from groups that have received programs or are on the contact lists of other departments within the agency/City can be very helpful. Tailoring the solicitation text for each group is advised, giving the name of the source for the contact as a way to give validity for the request. If there is a citizens’ advisory panel for the project, these members should be contacted for referrals to potential groups. Often a member of one community group or organization belongs to another group as well. Staff aides of the City Council or Board of Supervisors can provide the names of community leaders among their constituency that can be contacted for the names of additional groups. Key project stakeholders can be contacted monthly, giving a courtesy list of upcoming and completed speaking engagements and including a reminder in each notification for needed referrals to other groups.

**Taking the Show on the Road**

**Rehearsals and preparing for the audience**

Once the PowerPoint presentation is ready, it is helpful to schedule two or three in-house presentations to staff, giving the speakers an opportunity to try out the presentation and their public speaking skills. The Coordinator can schedule these during lunch breaks for employees. Providing food or snacks may encourage staff to attend. Ask the staff members to pose as many “tough” questions as they can think of at the end of the presentation, creating a role play opportunity as a potentially difficult or challenging audience.

Scheduling in-house rehearsals of the presentation has supplementary benefits. It informs employees about the content of the project’s community presentation. This helps in situations when they may interact with members of the public who have attended a Speakers Bureau program. It also keeps employees informed of the project’s public outreach efforts and gives them more details about the way the project’s messages are being presented.

Utilizing the “mock” questions, feedback from employee audiences, the experience of the project team, and input from public affairs professionals, the Coordinator can then create a “Question and Answer” sheet for speakers to use in rehearsing for a presentation. This has several benefits:
• Speakers are prepared for a wide variety of questions
• Speakers are prepared to give answers that may be difficult or unpopular with audiences
• All speakers will be answering questions using the same approach and policy orientation
• Facts about the subject matter are located in an accessible place for the speakers’ review

**Developing collateral materials and supplies**
Speakers can use “props” such as posters that can be placed on easels at the entrance to the meeting room or by the sign-in table. Posters that give basic contact information on the project can also be displayed on an easel near the speaker when a podium is used. These should be designed with large type that can be read from the back of the room. The Speakers Bureau Coordinator should also purchase sturdy easels for the posters. Certain settings may allow for several posters to be displayed while audience members gather and have a social time prior to the program. Maps and other educational materials developed for the project can also be enlarged, mounted and laminated as posters.

The “official” project brochure should always be handed out, which will have contact information. Presenters need to have options on how to distribute materials and may need information about the correct time to distribute handouts. Placing brochures on a table for pick-up at the end of a meeting usually means that most will not be retrieved, resulting in a lost opportunity for giving information and receiving feedback. There are situations; however, when this is the only option for distributing printed materials.

An alternative to a brochure is also helpful for settings where materials will be at a table display and when the speaker will be unable to retrieve left-over materials at the end of a presentation. A low-cost flyer produced in-house that gives a few key points about the project saves the cost of distributing expensively produced brochures in certain situations. Settings where this may be useful are high school classes, informational fairs, literature racks in off-site locations, large public meetings with lengthy agendas, etc.

Speakers should also have a flyer or brochure to distribute on the project’s Speakers Bureau presentation. This flyer includes information on how to contact the Speakers Bureau to schedule a similar program. Audience members frequently belong to other groups and occasionally will help secure presentations to these groups.

**Creating two-way feedback opportunities**
Each presentation should include distributing a handout that provides contact information about the project and provides a way to give feedback to the agency. Options for this include pre-addressed, postage paid postcards with short survey questions on the topic. Another possibility is a short survey form that audience members can complete at the conclusion of the meeting and leave for the speaker to retrieve. The Water Reuse Study’s informal opinion survey form on the Study’s website was modified slightly to be a paper version that could be distributed at speaking engagements.

**Designing a non-electronic version of the presentation**
In certain settings, speakers may be given only five minutes to present information on a project. This frequently occurs at public meetings with very full agendas, such as Planning Boards or the Board meetings of large organizations. A brief topical outline should be developed for speakers to follow in giving these presentations. In these situations, the Water Reuse Study speakers
found that distributing the Study brochure and survey form at the beginning of a short five-minute talk ensured that all audience members received the written materials. The Study brochure was then used as a “prop” by the speaker to highlight elements of the project by referring to specific content areas of the brochure.

Although distributing handouts at the beginning or during a presentation is usually not recommended in public speaking; this has been the most successful approach by Water Reuse Study speakers when the time frame allowed was extremely short. It ensures that audience members have received written information with contact details, have had a brief visual connection with the speaker, and at least “know” that the project or program exists.

**Coordinating presentations behind the scenes**
The Speakers Bureau Coordinator should handle all the details of an upcoming presentation with the group’s contact person, sparing the speakers from these administrative tasks. This includes obtaining details about the location, directions, room set-up and equipment needs, length of time allowed, audience size, demographics and interests or concerns. Additionally, the Coordinator can research in advance if there are any “hot buttons” with the neighborhood or group related to City or agency operations and can then prepare the speaker for possible audience comments. The Coordinator’s duties may also include sending the speaker’s biography and/or summary of the topic in advance (which may be needed for a newsletter announcement), or advance electronic or hard copies of the PowerPoint presentation. The Coordinator should reserve the audio-visual equipment, maintain adequate supplies of written materials and update the PowerPoint presentation when needed.

A master calendar of scheduled and completed presentations needs to be maintained and available to all speakers electronically. As each presentation is scheduled and a speaker confirmed, a worksheet is created and sent to the speaker giving full details about the upcoming presentation.

A speaker’s check-off list posted in the Speakers Bureau area is also helpful. Speakers can gather supplies independently of the Coordinator when necessary, using the list as a reminder to collect brochures, a current CD of the PowerPoint, a hard copy of the presentation, posters, easels, projectors, etc. The check-off list reminds speakers to bring business cards, extension cords and other minor details that can easily be overlooked when in a hurry. A biography and brief speaker’s introduction should be developed for each speaker and a hard copy of each should be part of the materials assembled for each presentation.

**Evaluating and Reporting Results**

**Activity documentation**
As stated in the Introduction and Speakers Bureau Goals sections of this paper, documenting the extent of the Speaker’s Bureau outreach into the community and tracking the audience questions and comments was very important to the City of San Diego’s Water Reuse Study. Several forms were developed for tracking purposes:

- A short Presentation Evaluation form asked the group’s contact or chairperson to rank the presenter’s skills, the content of the presentation, and the handouts. It is easiest to give the form to the group’s contact person at the presentation. The form should have a self-
addressed stamped envelope to be returned confidentially to the Speakers Bureau Coordinator.

- Each Speaking Engagement worksheet provided spaces for the speaker to record the number in attendance and a list of questions and comments from the group after the presentation. A summary list of presentations giving date, time, group, location, speaker, etc. would be included in the final Study report.

- A Questions and Comments Trends form was created which categorized the subject matter of the questions and comments of the audience as recorded on the worksheets. Sample categories were “health and safety concerns, cost comparisons to desalinated seawater, and reservoir augmentation.”

**Typical expenditures**

Establishing a focused Speakers Bureau for a specific project does not need to be costly. One way to minimize costs is to have speakers go to groups that are already meeting and be part of the agenda format. If the Speakers Bureau chooses to advertise and hold its own presentations at the agency’s facility or at a community location, it is likely that there will be a small turnout, unless the subject matter is controversial. This type of planning effort, staff time and materials can often be very costly and not achieve the desired results. However, going to already existing venues is a very effective way to reach targeted groups with minimal expenditure.

Other than staffing costs to coordinate the effort, an agency could expect to incur expenses for:

- a portable projector for PowerPoint presentations
- a laptop computer
- a professional presentation skills coach for a one-day training (if needed)
- maps or illustrations, mounted and laminated
- portable easels
- graphic design costs to develop flyers, illustrations and enhance the PowerPoint presentation
- flyers advertising the specific topic for the Speakers Bureau
- shared costs for the production and printing of the project brochure
- separate phone line and voice mail for the Speakers Bureau Hotline

**Conclusion**

It has been said that the greatest fear most people have is the fear of public speaking. Yet, for a successful public outreach program, communicating project information and key messages to the community in person is essential. With practice, project team members can become good, if not great, speakers on a specific subject. The support of a well-developed and organized Speakers Bureau program can assist speakers in becoming excellent representatives of the agency and good conduits of information back to the agency’s decision makers. A persistent and steady approach to soliciting speaking engagements in the community will ultimately achieve results.

In the first ten months of the Water Reuse Study’s Speaker’s Bureau, a group of four speakers (a civil engineer, chemist, biologist and administrator) gave 60 presentations, addressing groups in all eight City Council districts. Several speakers also participated in other public outreach
activities in addition to managing the research elements of the Study. Feedback was very positive and data collected from informal survey forms indicated that audience members had achieved a good understanding of the topic. Implementing a successful Speakers Bureau as part of a focused public outreach effort can be achieved by any agency that truly desires to communicate with the community.