Trending in an Instant

A Risk Communication Guide for Water Utilities

American Water Works Association

Dedicated to the World's Most Important Resource®
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Dear Reader:

As part of our long-standing effort to proactively inform and prepare utility leaders, AWWA has created Trending in an Instant: A Risk Communication Guide for Water Utilities to enhance your ability to communicate effectively when your utility finds itself unexpectedly in the spotlight. In an environment of reduced public trust in government agencies and a constantly changing and evolving media landscape, it is more important than ever that you are prepared to respond to the increasingly visible and sensational communication challenges around water. The guide is designed to provide research into the psychology and behavior behind customer response to media-driven community fears and, more importantly, deliver targeted tools and action steps to help you respond effectively before, during, and after a high-profile communications issue in your service area.

In this guide you will find recommendations and best practices to assist you in:

- Understanding today’s communication environment and the opportunities created by social media and risk communication
- Building your standing in the community as a trusted information source
- Responding effectively to community concerns that may stem from broadcast misinformation
- Learning from other utilities that have experienced a negative media cycle and maintained and grown their reputation
- Accessing the best of recent utility-focused communication research

Plus, the Appendix provides a series of Quick Response talking points for a variety of issues our members are facing, case studies from utilities across the country, and a robust list of additional resources.

We drew on the experience and expertise of your fellow water utilities in creating this guide to ensure the advice we provided was specific to the challenges faced by water utilities. Utility staff across the country graciously shared their field-tested tools, recommendations and lessons learned to help you plan for communication crises in your area. As Clay Duffie, General Manager of Mount Pleasant Waterworks, points out, "You can’t prevent an emergency. Your response and resulting communication are the only things you can control."

On that note, I want to point out that the risk communication guide is intended to complement existing communication efforts at your utility including crisis communications. A crisis communications plan is a critical tool in helping utilities manage emergency situations and we highly recommend incorporating this guide into your emergency management plans as a separate but equally critical planning tool. The risk communication guide is designed to help you manage and, hopefully, capitalize on unexpected communication challenges to build trust and develop relationships with your customers that can be leveraged for other communication efforts including during a crisis situation.
We encourage you to leverage the combined experience of the utility industry by reaching out to us and to your peers as you prepare risk communication strategies in your own organizations.

We intend for this guide to be a living document that we will update as the media and communication landscape continues to evolve to ensure that utility communicators and staff always have the most current information and tools at their fingertips. Our members provide an essential and life sustaining resource to customers across the world and we are committed to supporting you in that effort. It is our hope that you will find this guide a valuable tool in your utility management toolbox now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Mary Gugliuzza
Chair, AWWA Public Affairs Council
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Executive Summary

As a water service provider, your core focus is to protect public health and the environment. Water professionals have traditionally met their public health mission as a silent service. In the past, your utility’s standards, practices and processes may have received little attention from the community you serve. Today however, sensationalism around drinking water quality incidents, widespread broadcasting through social media, and the growth in public distrust of government agencies means your community needs to hear from you. The new media environment means you may need to respond quickly to media-driven community fears about the services you provide. Risk communication strategies and best practices can help.

As part of its long-standing efforts to proactively inform and prepare utility leaders, AWWA has created Trending in an Instant: A Risk Communication Guide for Water Utilities to enhance your ability to communicate effectively when your utility is in the spotlight. The guide helps you:

- Understand today's communication environment and the opportunities created by social media and risk communication;
- Build your standing in the community as a trusted information source;
- Respond effectively to community concerns that may stem from broadcast misinformation;
- Learn from other utilities that have experienced a negative media cycle and maintained and grown their reputation; and
- Access the best of recent utility-focused communication research.

Preparation is the best approach, but if you are experiencing a spotlight event right now, go to Page 19 for a checklist of response actions and targeted risk communication tools.
Today’s Context: Communicating in an Era of Distrust

While most utilities provide water and wastewater service that meets all standards, and even a short disruption of service is a rare event, utilities are seeing heightened anxieties about water quality and environmental concerns bubbling up from those they serve. Media coverage of the Flint, Michigan water crisis and the USA Today series on the lack of regulatory oversight of small water systems have had an impact. According to a 2016 Kaiser Family Foundation poll, Americans ranked contaminated drinking water third—just behind heroin abuse and cancer—as the biggest risk to public health. Most Americans report their trust in local government is much higher than their trust in state and federal governments; however, civility itself has become a concern, even for local jurisdictions.

Consumers are paying attention and increasingly seeking out information about the safety and quality of their water. Ideally, they receive information from you, and you are their trusted source for water information. However, if you are not communicating, they may turn to Google for information or a Facebook friend may provide a link to a company promoting a product. If this happens these sources can become your customer’s trusted source for water information. Social media sources may provide information that is incorrect, incomplete or without context. Investing in communication programs designed to build trust with consumers is an excellent way to insert yourself into a landscape crowded with self-proclaimed experts.

The Silent Service Provider

Being out of sight and out of mind has been a longstanding mode of operations for utilities. Water utility infrastructure is often in remote locations or buried underground, making it easy for consumers to overlook the integral role it plays in their daily lives. The magnitude and complexity of effort required to collect, treat and distribute clean, safe and high-quality drinking water, and then clean wastewater to protect the environment, is often lost on a public that depends these essential services. Most customers have a transactional relationship with their utility focused on paying their bill and an occasional call for customer service.

Many utilities have favored a reactive approach to communication focused on maintaining good, reliable water and wastewater service and answering customer questions as they arise. In fact, The Water Research Foundation (WRF) has found that nearly half of all water utilities have no communication plan and no staff dedicated to communications and community outreach work.

Even when utilities do proactively communicate, the focus is primarily on sharing information the utility assumes the customer is seeking rather than a direct response to the actual questions, conversations and perceptions developing within the community. In addition, most utilities communicate solely with the rate-payer, which means that consumers who rent or commute into a community to work may not receive direct information about their local drinking water and wastewater services. In the absence of more accessible and engaging information from their water provider, consumers may seek out answers or clarification elsewhere. These sources can range from anecdotal and inaccurate to factual and science-based. And the anecdotal information is often a bite-sized, easy-to-understand graphic whereas the more nuanced and complex
information may not be distilled into an approachable format for the typical consumer. The result is a variable consumer understanding of water quality and services. The result is a variable understanding of water quality and services.

A Growing Infrastructure Crisis and Rising Affordability Concerns

To further complicate the communication challenge, the cost to provide water and wastewater service is rising and its infrastructure is failing. By AWWA’s own calculation, in the U.S. an estimated $1 trillion investment is needed to maintain and expand service over the next 25 years. For many utilities, investments in infrastructure and updated technology have been deferred for decades because of a lack of political will to increase rates and concerns about maintaining affordable service.

As rates rise, public outcry in some communities has intensified due to lack of public understanding of the true cost of providing service. This environment makes it easy for a customer to be skeptical of the utility’s spending and may lead to an unfounded perception of financial mismanagement. Utilities now face a serious problem—balancing affordability while making significant investments in aging and failing infrastructure. These challenges have forced utility rate increases that leave some customers struggling to pay their bills and some utilities struggling to maintain long-term financial sustainability.

The Rise of Social Media

The explosion of social media over the past decade has changed how we communicate, but water utilities have been slow adopters of these new communication channels. Even utilities with longstanding communication programs have focused on standard channels like news releases, bill inserts, and mailed notifications. A 2017 WRF project found that a small minority of utilities are using social media at all and even water utilities that do use social media are only connecting to a fraction of the population they serve. Perhaps most problematic as it relates to the new media environment, the research found that most utilities aren’t giving customers the information they want on social media.

Social media provides a platform for consumers to engage and connect on a global scale. They can share information, raise awareness and rally support for issues they care about and reach beyond friends and family to hundreds or thousands of users on numerous social media platforms. This communication channel feeds the public’s increasing expectations for engagement and information about decisions that affect them. Indeed, social media has empowered the consumer. If leveraged correctly, social media can build support for and provide understanding of public interest issues like drinking water and wastewater treatment. If ignored or used to spread misinformation, the result can cause devastating impacts for a water utility. Inadequate, inaccurate and malicious information can cause reputational damage, a loss of support for a project, or worse, widespread panic.

For many utilities communicating on social media is daunting. Few small- and medium-sized utilities have the resources required to maintain and manage a robust social media program. Even large utilities with professional public relations staff must dedicate
resources to ensure two-way communication happens in real time. Some utilities have some activity on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter and balance that limited engagement with anecdotal reporting from employees who come across comments on their personal social media accounts. This can leave utility leaders informed about a conversation, but with no opportunity to engage in or impact it.

Advocacy and Misinformation Campaigns

In today's media environment, utilities are competing for attention with accomplished advocacy voices that have leveraged social media and used the water industry's past silence to establish themselves as influencers on water issues. Some of these influencers are self-proclaimed experts that have an economic interest in capitalizing on the public's growing concern about water quality to sell various products and services. Others are political advocates aiming to build a policy platform to recruit new supporters or dues-paying members.

Many influencers use fear-based messaging as a highly effective tactic for establishing themselves as a credible voice to consumers. They then advance their position or product as a solution to the perceived “fearful” problem and recruit supporters for their own political or economic gain. Scaring consumers and increasing skepticism around utility services is relatable and engaging to consumers, and hard to refute with the fact-based, infrequent communication methods currently used by many water utilities.

As a result, during a water quality event, other interests are successful in using their more established platforms and wide-ranging social media networks to drown out the often-quiet voice of the water utility. They can play off the fears of consumers to create sweeping misinformation campaigns that benefit their interests.

To combat this type of misinformation campaign, water service providers need to understand the motivations behind these interests and engage and reassure consumers through proactive risk communication.

Risk Communication Strategies Can Help

In 2002, Daniel Kahneman and Vernon Smith won the Nobel Prize in Economics for research demonstrating that when fear is present, people process information differently, and the science of risk communication was born. This research showed that when people are emotional, they shift their brain's information processing to the primitive amygdala. The only decision under consideration in the amygdala is how to be safe–should I flee, freeze or fight? When you are speaking with someone—in person or through social media—who is angry or emotional, it is critical to remember that they are processing everything as a fight response necessary to keep them safe. Risk communication best practices are designed to make people feel safe enough to return to reasoned discourse where broader information and considerations beyond immediate safety can be applied to decisions.

The ability to connect with audiences who are angry or emotional is an increasingly valuable leadership skill for utility professionals. Utilities can significantly diminish the consequences of the spotlight by applying risk communication best practices both proactively and during a crisis.

The following sections contain strategies, actions, examples and messages you can use to bring risk communication best practices to your utility.
Become the Trusted Source for Community Water Information

Water utilities should strive to be the trusted source for information about water in their community. Trusted sources lead in times of crisis, are rarely targeted for a negative campaign and quickly and easily recover if they are targeted. For example, trusted sources pass rate changes with community support and are viewed as community thought leaders for emerging challenges. In times of fear, uncertainty and complexity, people turn to trusted sources. Utilities can achieve this through proactive, regular communication and engagement, and the messages you share do not have to be slick, expensive or hard to develop to be effective.

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; and
- 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 change requests;
- Lose support for infrastructure needs; and
- Decrease community understanding and appreciation of the services you provide.

Utilities can implement a six-step process (Figure 1) to create an effective, proactive risk communication program designed to reduce exposure to a future negative media spotlight.

**Figure 1: Six steps for building a proactive communication program**

1. Gather a team

Don’t go it alone. Start by identifying who can help you. In addition to providing support now, collaborating on proactive messaging sets you up to have a strong team when you really need it—in the event of a negative media spotlight.
Work closely with your public relations staff, if you have one, and your technical staff. Collaborating with technical staff ensures messages are accurate. In addition, technical staff bring viewpoints that help address a broader range of public concerns. For example, in this guide you’ll find a case study on Aqua Pennsylvania that explains how it created a communication team in their Technical Services Department that bridged the gap between customer questions and technical responses to address community concerns.

Look outside your organization for proactive communication team members. You want to identify potential team members that have knowledge about water and public health and are trusted by the community. Research indicates that professors, teachers and health departments (local, state and federal) are typically considered highly-trusted sources, while even local government officials tend to be in the middle on the trust scale.

Those in political and leadership positions like mayors and city council members, as well as environmental and health leaders in the public, private and non-profit sectors, can also be good team members. Developing collaborative relationships now can keep you from having to do all the heavy lifting in a time of crisis.

2. Set your objectives
The objective of all communication is to create change. The more specific you are about the change you want to see in response to your communication, the more likely you are to achieve it.

Defining the objective is, perhaps, the most critical step in any form of communication. If your utility is new to proactive communication and your community is used to hearing from you only through a bill, make your objective foundational. For example, your objective might be to build understanding of the value of the services you provide. The Additional Resources section at the back of this guide can help you deliver foundational messages and become more proactive in your communication.

Reaching one communication objective often requires attaining a series of sub-objectives. For example, if you want your community to have a better understanding of the complexity surrounding per- or polyfluorinated substances (PFAS), you may start by setting an objective for consumers to understand where PFAS come from. Identifying the sub-objectives needed to meet a broader goal is a great way to keep your communication focused and build your voice as a trusted source.

Setting objectives is an iterative process and requires consideration in each step. For example, different team members may have different ideas about the best communication objective for the community, or they may have opinions about what order the sub-objectives need to be addressed. It’s OK to have external team members, technical staff, and management with different objectives; the trick is to list everyone’s ideas freely and then work together to set priorities.

If your objective is to build community understanding about a topic that is beginning to appear in the media, be strategic. Receiving abundant amounts of information can be overwhelming to people; it can make them trust you less and potentially escalate the situation. When there is significant uncertainty and complexity, provide information in layers, always addressing what the audience wants to hear. For example, talk about health effects right off the bat if that is what the community is discussing but also provide your core message over and over, so they are hearing a steady, confident, “we’ve got this” message.

Address escalation concern:
If escalation is a concern, repeat your core message over and over using all your delivery routes. Get as many trusted sources as possible to contribute to the conversation using the same core message. Repetition is very reassuring. Make sure your core message is caring, names the concern, and stresses that you agree that the concern is legitimate, and you have experienced this type of concern yourself.
3. Identify what the community wants to hear

It’s easy to identify what you want to tell your community, but not as easy to identify what your community wants to hear. One of the fundamental principles of risk communication is to consider and respond to what the audience is interested in hearing. Addressing the questions already in the community’s mind creates strong engagement and makes it easier to create effective messages. The best way to know what your community wants to hear is to ask them! If you don’t have resources for focus groups or a survey, ask the group of community influencers you selected in Step 1 to identify topics their constituencies are concerned about. Work with your team to identify one or two common themes across groups.

Once you have created a voice by talking about what the public is interested in hearing, consider expanding your communication to create understanding about a potential topic of concern. In the appendices you’ll find several Quick Reference Topic sheets addressing topics with complexity and uncertainty that could lead to community concern. Figure 2 provides the list of these topics. The Quick Reference Topic sheets provide examples of questions of concern and responses written using risk communication best practices. Use these as communication short-cuts—but don’t use them instead of listening to what your community is asking.

Typical questions of critical concern include:

- Where does this problem come from?
- What are the potential consequences to me and my family?
- What do I need to do to protect myself and my family?
- What are you doing to protect me and my family?
- What else can I do?

4. Build Effective Messages

Words matter, and there are simple techniques you can use to develop messages that create connections and new understanding. Think about building messages in two parts: 1) Create an emotional connection and 2) share information using the 27/9/3 Rule.

Create an emotional connection

Communication is processed through emotional synapses in the brain. Incoming information is unconsciously sorted using emotions to determine where to focus. Use this knowledge to your advantage. Start by connecting to audiences through a shared value. For example, we are all here today because we care about the safety of our community drinking water. Emotional connectors create engagement and set the tone for the rest of the communication.

Share information using the 27/9/3 Rule

You can probably think of lots of information that could be included in responses to community questions, especially if the community needs to understand emotional, complex or uncertain topics. However, brain research informs us that most people can only process up to 27 words that can be spoken in 9 seconds or less and have three or fewer pieces of information. Anything more than this diminishes the power of the message. This means that the first step in developing effective messages is to identify the specific pieces of information that are most useful to the audience.
You can still share a lot of information, but to meet audience needs it is best to deliver information in layers. Delivering information in layers using the 27/9/3 Rule works great for social media.

To develop answers to the questions in your community members’ minds, start by listing all the information you could use to address that question. Then prioritize which pieces of information are most important to the audience. Remember that questions of critical concern form barriers to learning so always start with addressing what your community is talking about and keep it extremely simple. When you have your list prioritized, pick the two pieces of information you think are most important and combine them with the fact that you care about the issue and the audience. Risk communication best practices require that one piece of information you share in every message right up front is—you care.

**Create a common core message**

Now that you have prioritized what information to share, take your three priority pieces of information and work them into a message that is no more than 27 words. Don’t worry about the exact number—but keep it short. If the communication channel you are using is social media, adding a visual to your core message helps build understanding.

For example, in the cyanobacteria-related message illustrated in Figure 3, the three pieces of information being shared are: 1) together we can protect our water sources (we care); 2) algal blooms can be reduced; and 3) we need to reduce nutrients from septic tanks and garden fertilizers. This message also infers an action someone can take to reduce blooms, which makes the message even more powerful. The example message is designed to be part of a broader message campaign to increase understanding of cyanobacteria and cyanotoxins, and is not intended as a stand-alone message.

**Figure 3: Example of risk communication-based social media post using a core message**

*Together we can protect our drinking water sources from “blooms” like these by reducing the amount of nutrients they receive from the misuse/overuse of garden fertilizers and from septic tanks.*
5. Deliver where they are listening

People do not seek out answers to complex, uncertain risk. Instead, we listen for answers from those we are already listening to—even if they don’t know anything about the topic!

Getting people to listen to your message in this information-overloaded world is a challenge, especially when it is complex, uncertain or creates anxiety. To effectively communicate, you must use your own communication channels as well as those of community influencers to reach people where they are already listening.

Although much of the focus in this guide is on social media, take advantage of the full range of proactive communication opportunities available to you, including community meetings and forums, forging relationships with reporters, and direct communication channels you may already be using.

The links in the Additional Resources section at the back of this guide provide you with the latest water utility communication research and best practices.

Use your community influencers’ communication channels to reach people where they are already listening. Reach out to your community influencers that you identified in Step 1 and ask them what they think their audiences are interested in knowing about water. Identify the communication channels they use to communicate with their audiences and offer to share materials for their delivery channels (see sample ideas to the right). Given the need for content, most leaders will be happy to share your information.

Social media is a great way to identify and participate in audience-specific proactive communication. Identify local community web and social media sites that might provide access to community members with potential concerns about water. Work with these social media site managers to develop opportunities for posting on their site.

To share information on another owner’s site, reach out to the owner with a specific opportunity and explain why and how their members will benefit.

6. Proceed carefully on social media

Communicating on a social media platform is different than any other communication channel. You communicating in real time, you have no idea who is watching you, nor what they are doing with the information you are sharing. You also may not know whether the person you are responding to lives in your community or a thousand miles away.

The anonymity, pace and viral nature of social media can make it especially challenging to use during a risk communication event, but it is the communications channel of choice for many of your consumers. No utility wants to be on the receiving end of a negative social media onslaught or organized campaign. If the social media spotlight gets turned on your utility during a risk communication event there are some essential techniques you can use to enhance your reputation and combat misinformation.

First and foremost, the best strategy is to be prepared. Here are some steps you can take now to provide you with a framework to react should you need to deal with bad publicity on social media in the future:

7. Create a social media policy for your employees

Sometimes bad publicity on social media can start with employees. Establish a policy that specifies what is appropriate use of social media, your expectations for who can use your utility’s accounts and how to deal with customer information on social media. This
is key and can prevent the sort of crisis that ensues when an employee posts something inappropriate on a private account or on your utility’s platform.

While you are developing your social media policy, make sure your accounts have strong passwords and that you change the passwords after employees leave the utility or move to other positions that don’t require them to post on social media accounts. Managers of employees who access your utility’s social media accounts should also know how to limit or revoke access to the accounts in a social media crisis management situation.

**Create an external social media usage policy**

Develop a written policy for engaging with external users that helps you moderate conversations in a professional and open manner. Your policy should explain when you will delete a comment or ban users and outline how you will handle discord.

The policy should include guidelines on what constitutes acceptable comments and what does not, and what actions will be taken for comments that do not meet these standards. Your policy should be visible to social media users so that you can refer to it when needed in response to those that may be in violation of your policy.

**Pay attention to what is being talked about**

Social media can provide valuable insight into potential communication issues well before they start to register or escalate with your customers. Follow your local elected officials, neighboring utilities, influential community and environmental groups, and state and federal regulatory agencies to see what they are posting and how people are responding to issues they are dealing with. AWWA’s Water Utility insider highlights upcoming and current issues and can support your understanding of the nature and penetration of community issues.

Identify issues that could pop up in your community and start to prepare your response now. Even if an issue is unlikely to occur in your area, be aware of it and prepare a response. When water news is shared via social media, it is often shared by several sources and can seem very local when the story may be about something happening in an entirely different state or region. This can sometimes make people feel as if there is an immediacy and local connection when there isn’t. Sometimes information being shared isn’t even current. It’s not unusual to see an older article, tweet or concern reappear after relative dormancy.

If your staff resources are strained, consider hiring outside assistance, as some utilities do, to monitor water issues being talked about on social media and through traditional media outlets.

**Develop hypothetical responses to potential negative social media comments**

It’s a common occurrence for a customer to complain in an email or during a phone call. What if those complaints were posted on your Facebook page? Thinking through how you’d respond and documenting that in advance can help staff react quickly if you are suddenly thrust into a negative social media situation where comments are coming at you quickly.

Some utilities create editable documents that live on the organization’s intranet or a shared file. As staff work through difficult comments their responses can be documented and used for the next encounter. Of course, this document will not include the answer to every single complaint you will ever receive, but it will give staff a greater idea of what the utility expects when negative situations arise on social media.
Set a standard response time

Social media is not a “set it and forget it” communications channel. To be effective you must monitor your platforms regularly and consistently and respond within a reasonable timeframe. What’s reasonable? In most cases social media users expect a response within hours, not days, especially if they are reaching out to you about a concern or complaint. This can be a challenge when a comment comes in after typical business hours—which frequently happens. As water utilities know, main breaks always seem to happen during evening rush hours and weekends. Similarly, negative social media inquiries don’t always occur Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. And, just like main breaks, social media complaints are highly visible with people watching and evaluating how you respond. If you wait until Monday afternoon to respond to a customer that says they just got home from work on Friday to find rusty-colored water coming from their faucets and then several other commenters say they have the same problem, what does that say about your utility’s customer service?

Determine what an appropriate response time for your utility is and make sure you assign staff coverage for that timeframe. This will likely mean that someone on your communications staff needs to be responsible for checking your social media accounts at night and on weekends to ensure that any comments or inquiries are handled in a timely fashion. It is also helpful to have someone from your water quality or operations staff available at these times to assist the communications staff with technical responses if possible. However, people are generally understanding of a response that says you are looking into the issue and would like to connect the customer to your emergency services team offline during non-business hours.

Understand that you will receive negative comments

People will disagree with you, just like in real life. But social media can mask tone and intent. Just because someone disagrees with you doesn’t mean that they are attacking you or your utility.

Recent research finds that customers that routinely express strong emotion at utility public meetings represent the opinion of less than 10 percent of customers. This thought may also apply to those that comment on social media. Don’t assume the comments you see represent all customers.

When exchanges seem emotional or heated, use caution when you respond so that you don’t appear defensive. Some social media users—especially those on Twitter—expect you to debate them; it’s how the medium works. Social media is a 24/7 presence and listening and responding quickly to negative comments using a professional and human tone can go a long way toward keeping a situation from becoming bigger than it ought to be.