

WATER

CONSERVATION COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE



**American Water Works
Association**

Dedicated to the World's Most Important Resource™

Synopsis

WATER CONSERVATION was once avoided by professionals in the water industry. The notion of actively trying to sell less of one's product was considered ludicrous.

However, recent science indicates that climate shift is occurring rapidly and that significant impacts to the environment will be felt during this century. Among the first and most critical impacts will be changes to precipitation patterns around the world, including both prolonged periods of drought and more intense—though less frequent—periods of rain. In mountainous areas, snow lines are rising, a greater percentage of overall precipitation is falling as rain rather than snow, and snowpack, one of nature's methods of storing water, is melting faster and earlier in the season. These changes will affect water availability, water resource management, water quality, capture and storage strategies and many other factors critical to water and wastewater utilities.

As a result, many water providers now find themselves grappling with water resource and treatment/conveyance capacity constraints. For those agencies, water conservation is beneficial and in some cases essential. Successful conservation efforts can also curb peak system demand, deferring the need for construction of new treatment, storage and conveyance facilities, as well as **reducing energy costs and wastewater infrastructure**, allowing water utilities to focus on replacement or rehabilitation of older existing infrastructure.

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Conservation Outreach Strategy

The simplistic concept of a “water conservation program” does not reflect the reality of how people use water or how municipal water providers manage demand. In reality, conservation communications are not a single initiative but rather a portfolio of often interrelated but independently operated programs targeting **specific behaviors** and **market segments**.

It is important to understand that awareness and even belief do not necessarily translate to a desired behavior. **Conservation hinges upon an action; that is, a program in which people can participate or a regulation with which they can comply.** Effective conservation outreach efforts focus on bridging the chasm between thought and action to induce behaviors such as participating in an incentive program or complying with water use regulations, such as mandatory irrigation restrictions. To accomplish this, utility managers must think and behave like marketing experts, identifying target audiences and selecting paths and messages specific to their needs. In attempting to speak to everyone, there’s potential to dilute the message so much that no one receives it.

Water agencies can no longer use a cookie-cutter approach any more than Procter and Gamble can market its diverse product line using a single campaign. Therefore, this communications plan will take a programmatic approach that relates specifically to each facet of the water agency’s conservation program.



Conservation vs. Drought Response

There is an important distinction between permanent conservation measures and drought response. **Drought response is a temporary measure, often enacted during periods of severe resource challenges for a relatively short time, whereas permanent conservation represents a fundamental long-term shift in behaviors.** This distinction is important for several reasons. First and foremost, given the natural inclination of the public to rally in times of crisis, people are generally more accepting of short-term measures than permanent changes.

Less intrusive drought response measures can often be made permanent with few repercussions. An emergency can serve as a trial to demonstrate that measures have little to no impact on residents' quality of life. Transitioning short-term measures into permanent regulations can be an elegant way of achieving sustained conservation without undue strain on the relationship between utility and customer.

The distinction between permanent conservation and drought response also has financial implications for water utilities. Emergency measures are more painful fiscally in the short term, while long-term conservation measures have more modest but longer-lasting effects. Long-term conservation can be planned for through the budgeting process so that any associated revenue decrease is incorporated into the operating costs of the utility.



Operational Objectives

All effective public communication is designed to evoke either behavioral or perceptual change. While there may be an overarching operational objective of reducing per capita water use, no single communications initiative can be correlated to that goal. Rather, the objectives must be related to the individual water conservation programs, such as participation in a program, compliance with the watering schedule, etc., that can be translated directly to a reduction in water use. Before a water agency's leaders approve a communications program, they should have some way to quantify how much water they are "buying" through the combination of outreach and incentive dollars.

Therefore, each program's objectives must be evaluated individually. It is incumbent upon the agency's public affairs staff to work with operations, conservation professionals where such a function exists, or other appropriate technical staff in establishing specific operational goals for each program. "As much as we can get" is not an adequate target, either in terms of participation or Return on Investment (ROI). Participation should be measured either in whole numbers or market share, while compliance with regulations should be measured as a percentage based on either quantitative research, technical data such as Firefly meter readings, an observational field sample or a combination thereof.



Avoiding Conservation Backlash

Water utilities are sometimes surprised by backlash to water conservation outreach, particularly when it is related to a compulsory measure, such as a mandatory watering schedule or water use restriction. There is a certain segment of the population that will actively resist any effort that it believes may potentially affect quality of life, even if that belief is unfounded. While critics of water conservation measures have difficulty gaining traction for their positions—after all, who wants to promote water waste—they will frequently attempt to paint the sponsoring utility as hypocritical based on its own water use practices.

This approach is often successful at generating media interest, which may impact not only the water agencies but senior utility management and local elected officials. For that reason, it is critical that water utilities conduct a review of their own water use practices, and those of relevant officials where feasible, before publicizing new water use rules. By recognizing poor water use habits, the utility both establishes itself as a leader and inoculates itself against criticism.



Questions and Considerations

Before initiating a communications program designed to elicit behavioral change, it is useful to consider the key factors that will contribute to its success or failure. The list below is useful as a planning tool; when the communications program architects are comfortable that they understand the answers, the likelihood of successful implementation increases significantly.

- Who is the target audience?
- What are their underlying socio-economic characteristics?
- What is the most efficient/effective way to reach them?
- What are the barriers to reaching that audience?
- How receptive is the audience to the new behavior?
- What are they specifically being asked to do?
- Will they be provided with any tools?
- Is the program new, or is it a revision of an existing program?
- How dramatic a change from the previous behavior is being sought?
- Is the utility asking for a one-time action or permanent change?
- Is the behavior easy/difficult, inexpensive/costly, simple/complicated?
- Can people do it themselves or will they need professional assistance?
- What are the consequences of not doing it?
- Will there be peer pressure for or against the proposed behavior?

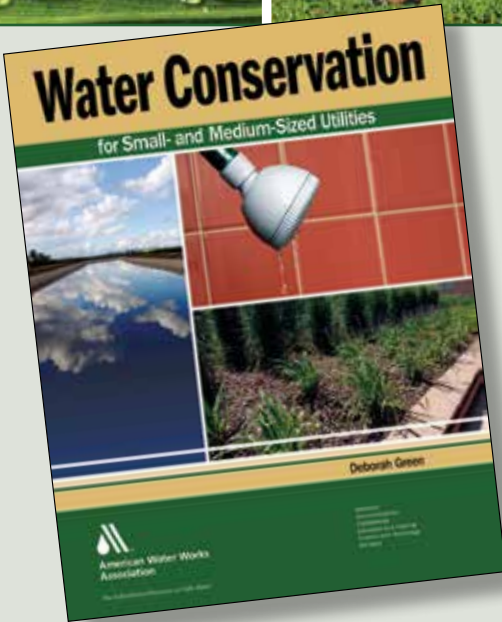


Research and Evaluation

The importance of quantitative research to effective water efficiency communications programs cannot be overstated. Many of the questions above can only be answered through quantitative surveys. Properly conducted research serves five primary needs:

- 1 Answering many of the questions and considerations outlined above
- 2 Identifying specific target audience demographics to maximize advertising efficiency and messaging
- 3 Identifying barriers to participation and evaluating the potential effectiveness of different outreach strategies
- 4 Evaluating the effectiveness of various executions to enable course adjustments
- 5 Quantifying the effectiveness of outreach efforts and isolating factors that contribute to or detract from an initiative's success

Many agencies are reluctant to invest in quantitative research because of perceived cost. However, research generally represents less than 10 percent of communications-related expenditures and pays for itself through optimized communications tactics. It is better to invest in information first than to discover after expending the full budget whether or not the outreach assumptions are true.



Outline of Outreach Initiatives

It's difficult to develop standard conservation communications tools for AWWA's member water purveyors due to the variety and individualized nature of local programs and restrictions. Therefore, this toolkit will take a template-based approach that may be modified or extrapolated to fit specific conditions at a given agency. Additional information on these types of programs can also be found in AWWA's *Water Conservation for Small- and Medium-Sized Utilities* publication.



Sample Conservation Bill Stuffers From AWWA

Bill Stuffers produced by AWWA can be purchased online at www.awwa.org/bookstore.



Slow
the flow.



Tips to conserve water in your lawn and garden.



How low can you flow?

water conservation at home

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