

# Communications 101



**S**tep right up!  
One and all!  
Gather round! What I have here in my hand is an ancient remedy that will help each and every one of you. Do you suffer from sleeplessness, hair loss or poor appetite? Are you a small water system (you serve fewer than 10,000 people)? Would you like to have more customers attend board meetings? Have fewer customers attend board meetings? Would you like to find motivated board candidates in order to fill vacancies? Have qualified board members run for re-election unopposed? Increase rates without protests? Successfully pass revenue bond elections? Have fewer customer complaints? Get more customers to pay their bills on time? Protect your territory from encroachment? Well this bottle of magic elixir can do all those things and more! And, it's only \$19.99! Okay, I'm kidding about the sleeplessness, hair loss or poor appetite. There is no magic tonic for those things. But all those other small water system problems can be cured with one simple tool – a COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.

Yep – there is a simple, effective and virtually free solution to all of those problems, and it's called COMMUNICATION. If you are one of the small water systems that DOES have a communications plan, you can stop reading now and pat yourself on the back. Otherwise, pay attention! I have no idea why small water systems are so unwilling to communicate with their customers, but they are. Yes, I am finger pointing! Most small water systems have a communications plan that consists of publishing their CCR annually (and usually it contains the bare minimum of information, all in undefined, highly technical terms) and notifying customers of rate increases. (However, I am here to tell you that some boards just send out bills with the increased rate and hope that the customers may or may not notice.) Oh and they post a monthly meeting notice on a bulletin board somewhere in the office. Maybe customers will see it and maybe they won't.

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I truly do not understand where this bunker mentality came from. Back in the 60's and 70's, the founding water board members had to sell the idea of paying for water to their original customers. The local folks who cared enough to ask USDA for a loan and do the hard work to start a rural water system had to reach out to neighbors and friends and convince them to start paying for water. Most of those original customers already had a well, so their water was "free." The original water boards had to build relationships with their customers. Perhaps the problem is that as time has passed, small water systems look a lot more like small monopolies. Today it is much more expensive to drill your own well

and there may be environmental and regulatory restrictions that prevent it. As far as most customers know, they have no choice but to be water system customers. This has made some small water systems start to act more like the "man behind the curtain" than good customer service representatives. Don't get me wrong. I'm not accusing systems of failing to do a good job providing water service. I'm accusing them of failing to let their customers KNOW that they are doing a good job providing water service. Most small water systems have poor relationship skills and a communications plan will help fix that, because we all know that good relationships are based on . . . COMMUNICATIONS!

But developing a communications plan sounds hard and expensive, you grumble? And our customers pay their bills and don't bother us too much, so why do we need one, you mutter? A good communications plan does not have to be expensive and it can improve your system in all sorts of

ways. Imagine a world where customers don't come to meetings to complain about small matters, because they have a cheap and effective way to reach out to staff in lieu of coming to a meeting. Imagine a world where board seats are filled with motivated individuals who are knowledgeable about waster system issues. Imagine a world where disgruntled individuals do not run against qualified board members just because they are frustrated and upset about a small service issue. Imagine a world where a water system can raise rates and not incur the wrath of its customers. Imagine where a water system can obtain new financing and have it supported by a majority of the customers. And imagine living in a world where customers are not confused about territorial boundaries and are loyal to the water system. A communications plan can accomplish these objectives and it can be summed up in three simple words: embrace the Internet.

### Here are some starting points:

**1. Email, email, email.** First of all, there is no excuse not to collect the email addresses of every customer that every system has. Today, that should be most of your customers.

Requesting an email address should be a routine part of any new application for service, and since we are talking about small systems, there are not that many emails for existing customers that the office would have to collect manually. Remember, a small system is defined as fewer than 10,000 people served, not 10,000 actual customers. There's a difference! "People served" is the number of people who are drinking your water. A "customer" is one account, where more than one person may reside. So start gathering emails!

Once you have them, you can implement one phase of your communications plan. Here are four easy things you can do with email addresses:

**a. Monthly bills.** Email your monthly bills. If you are still sending out your bills using snail mail, then do the math! Most billing software will autogenerate bills if you have email addresses entered. It should be easier and cheaper to track the customers who do NOT have email than to send out bills manually to all customers every month. You can save enough on postage to cover any costs it will take to get some talented 12 year old to help you configure an email customer list database or to track the customers who do not have email. The key however, is to start using your bills to communicate as well as collect money! There is almost always an extra field on the bill that will allow you to add a customized note. How about a standing reminder that the monthly meeting is held on the second Monday of the month? Or a board vacancy notification? Or a reminder that

a rate increase is pending? Or a notification that late fees are incurred after the 5th of the month? Any kind of customer nudge or tweak is a good thing. It is all part of building a relationship with your customers.

**b. CCR and system updates.** Bills aren't the only thing that you can email customers! The sky is the limit. Most small water systems balk at the idea of sending out a monthly or quarterly newsletter because it is too hard to come up with content and too expensive to mail. I agree. However, with email addresses you can send customers quick email blasts when something does occur. New board members? New staff members? Send out brief bio. Planning any improvements to the system? Keep customers informed so that they make the connection between system improvements and increased rates. Time for the annual

CCR? Send a clear and simple CCR annually that really lets them know about the quality of their water and where it comes from. Need new board candidates? Put out the word via email. The goal is clear and transparent communications and establishing a relationship with the customers. Reach out to them!

**c. Emergency response.** You can incorporate a customer email database into your emergency response plan. (You do have an emergency response plan, don't you?) No one likes to have to issue a boil order, but if you do, you can reach the majority of your

customers much more quickly via email. You will still have to publish in local newspaper or run radio ads, but customers are comforted by an email notification. Email notifications of water line breaks, repair estimates, and outages all build consumer confidence. No one is too happy about a water outage. But if you wake up and don't have water, the first thing you wonder is WHY you don't have water. Is it just me, you ask? Or is EVERYONE else without water too? Imagine how much stress and annoyance is removed by a simple email from the water system that tells you that normal service will be interrupted tomorrow for planned upgrades. Or that service is out to certain area because of a water line break but should be restored by 5 p.m. An email like that will reduce the number of calls to the office and reassure customers.

**d. Communications is a two-way street.** Why not set up a dedicated customer service email address? Include it on the bottom of your monthly bill. Office staff will spend less time taking down garbled messages from the office voice mail. They can avoid arguments with difficult customers and the correct staff person can respond to the complaint or pass it on to the board. Speaking of boards, I can't tell you how many times that I have seen customers

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come to board meetings because of a simple complaint or question that could have easily been answered via email. Do you dread the public comments portion of the meeting agenda? Well then give customers a way to ask simple questions or even to rant outside of the meeting! A customer service email address can also help with employee morale, because employees can track their response to those difficult customers who like to complain about them. No more “he said/she said” disputes with customers over alleged employee behavior. In addition, a customer service email address allows you to send new customers an application, track repair trends or water quality problems, and address repair requests more quickly. If several customers in the same area report low water pressure, then that could be the first step in identifying a system upgrade. And those emails can be used to support the need for a bond election in order to raise the money for those system improvements. The more information you can gather about customers, the better you can address system needs.



## COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- ✓ Board member pics, bios and terms
- ✓ Links to meeting minutes
- ✓ “What’s new” – updates on system repairs, outages, improvements
- ✓ Rates
- ✓ Customer applications
- ✓ Policies and procedures
- ✓ Articles of incorporation and by-laws
  - ✓ A current map of the system, with subdistricts identified
  - ✓ Job openings
  - ✓ FAQ’s

The reason that I suggest using a FB page is because many small systems are completely intimidated by the prospect of

creating and maintaining a Web page. I agree. A Web page can be expensive and time-consuming. But almost everyone knows how to create a FB page. Take a look at the Howell County Public Water Supply District, fewer than 400 customers and a GREAT FB page! They do not have a Web site, but they don’t really need one. Unless you are planning on creating a payment portal or some other interactive feature, you probably don’t need a Web site. What you do need is a way to generate positive interest in your system through customer education. Teach your customers about their system. Show them pictures of your employees at work. Build rapport.

That is really what a communication plan is – a tool for educating your customers and for getting them both emergency and everyday information. Communication planning is described as the art and science of reaching target audiences (your customers) using direct mail email, or other communication channels. It is concerned with deciding who to target, when, with what message and how. I will make yet another push for boards to stop being so lazy and to practice honest and open communications with customers. If you are doing a great job of running your system, and you exercise your elected, fiduciary responsibility in a proper manner by providing potable water in the most cost effective manner possible, then share that! If you realize that you do not want to implement a communications plan because you are not ready to be in the spotlight, then think about what that says about your water system!

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**2. Facebook.** Okay, so if all my pleas for using email have fallen on deaf ears, please consider this. I’m not suggesting that you have to manage a continuous Twitterfeed, but consider setting up even a simple Facebook page. Everyone from my niece’s turtle to the White House has a Facebook page. And why not? It’s free, your employees are probably checking their OWN Facebook pages during the day anyway, so they won’t mind updating the district’s Facebook page, and people love joining new Facebook communities. You can put a simple “follow us on FB” statement at the bottom of each bill. Use your imagination! You can create a customer community and build support for the board. Look at some FB pages for larger utilities or municipalities and you can get some great ideas. But for the sake of simplicity, here is a basic list of things to put on a FB page:

- ✓ PICTURES!
- ✓ Meeting notices and agendas
- ✓ Staff pictures, job functions and contact info