

Computer Corner

Thinking About New Year's Resolutions For The Workplace

A new year is usually a time for reflection and contemplation of the events of the passing one, though, most would probably agree that 2020 was something out of the Twilight Zone. For many of us working in or connected to the water industry in Kansas, March of 2020 was undoubtedly missing something very big – the Kansas Rural Water Association Exhibition and Conference. And, here we are again, with a big hole in our calendar, usually filled with old friends and new acquaintances, education and enlightenment, and, of course, FUN! =Everyone should look forward to 2022 with a bigger and better event than ever. Meanwhile, we can think about what things are in our grasp right now that we might be able to make better.

Traditionally, with the start of a new year, many folks will have vowed to devote themselves to one sort of self-improvement plan or another. By now, they'll be well on their way to success, or sadly, perhaps thrown in the towel. The new year can also be a time to look back on the office's tools and procedures and consider what New Year's resolution we might like to make.

A portion of our support efforts this time of year is helping people do end of year work. That includes everything from reports that can help a board or managers make decisions for the next year to discussing ways to make the office work more efficient and sometimes less costly.

Recently we were working with a client who was feeling overwhelmed preparing for her water district's annual meeting. It was a greater chore than usual because she had to make sure that plans included social distancing considerations. Because more space was needed,



arrangements of place and the time were up in the air. She was in the process of preparing announcements to be mailed out, stating that they were working on the event but would have to be back in touch with the details. Of course this would mean another round of mailings, more time and more expense. The discussion turned to how much more efficient and economical it would be to email the bulk of her customers. Then, even if there were an alteration in plans, they could turn on a dime, keeping their customers in the loop. And, think of the financial savings!

Of course, it's too late for her water district to enjoy that efficiency and economy for this year's meeting. But, they now plan to launch a campaign of collecting email addresses and adding those addresses to their utility software customer information to offer email billing.

There probably isn't a person who has worked at utility billing for any length of time without hearing a customer say something to the effect of, "I shouldn't get any late charge, I never even got my bill!" That's when the person in the office must bite their tongue to keep from asking, "How old are you? Aren't you an adult and know that you are to receive a utility bill around the same time each month?" Yes, it should be common sense that if they REALLY haven't received their bill on schedule, they should call the office to report it and get the needed

information. And, the same should go for paperless billing. It's a sure bet that once in a while, there will be a customer that for some reason doesn't get their email bill, possibly because they unknowingly tossed it in the virtual trashcan themselves or their email redirected it to a spam folder. Of course, there are always those who fail to pay, then claim they didn't get it. Either way, it's a good idea to have anyone signing up for paperless billing put their signature to an agreement that has them acknowledging acceptance of the responsibility for reporting a failure to receive their bill on time. The sample letter in this article is one that is being used by some utility systems.

In addition to sending out bills using email, the business of late charges can be addressed by email as well. Some folks email a warning that the past due date is approaching as a service to their customers to help them avoid any late charge. When one of our clients implemented this practice, she had immediate and grateful reactions from some customers who she parlayed for them to sign up for ACH, i.e., Automatic Payment, which they enthusiastically embraced! For the utility's customers, it guarantees not missing the payment date and getting a late charge. For the water system, it means steady cash flow rather than times of financial famine as delinquencies increase. Automatic banking can also free up some of the clerks time to accomplish other things. A clerk with one hundred customers on ACH hits a button and pays one hundred bills all at once. By comparison, mailed payments limp in and are entered into the computer individually.

Some worry that implementing programs like these to help customers avoid late charges may eat too much into the revenue those late charges generate. Usually, the savings experienced

make up the difference and make for happier more contented customers with less late charges or shut-offs. Not to mention the happier staff that deal with those more cheerful customers.

But I digress...getting on the ACH wagon, now...back to email. With those email addresses added to their billing software they also have another option for late notices. Some systems spend time and money each month

Customer Agreement for Bills via Email

Here is a sample letter that might be used to obtain permission from utility customers to provide billing notices or other correspondence via email.

Email Billing Customer Agreement

Water District or City Name (Letterhead paper or filled in by the computer)
 City Address
 City, State ZIP
 Phone Number; Water District or City Email Address

Month Day, Year

Customer's Name (This can be arranged to show in a window envelope for mailing)
Customer's Address
City, State ZIP

Subject: Paperless Email Billing
 Customer Account Number: *Customer Account Number Here*

Dear *Customer's name here*:

The District/City wants to provide utility customers a choice for paper-less/email billing to replace the traditional billing through the US Postal Service. If you wish to convert your account, number *Account Number filled in here by Mail Merge*, fill out the form and return it to the address listed at the top of the page or bring it by the water office.

Yes, I want my bill emailed, each month. I understand that I should expect a bill within the first five days of each new month, (This text will vary from one water system to the next). I am aware that if I do not receive an email bill at that time, then it is my responsibility to contact the water office between the hours of 8 AM and 4 PM, weekdays, excluding holidays, to get the information needed to pay my bill on time and avoid any late charges.

My Email Address is: _____

Bills will be sent out by both US Postal Service mail and email for the first two months to ensure that everything is working correctly. Once (WATER DISTRICT OR CITY'S NAME HERE) is confident that everything is working correctly, paper billing will cease. If you do not begin to see your email bill within two months of sending in this letter of agreement, contact the office at (OFFICE PHONE NUMBER HERE).

If Late Notices are also to be emailed, add this...

Late notices will also be emailed but a claim of failure to receive a late notice will not be accepted as a reason for not paying a bill. The regular statement would have already provided all needed information. Again, it is the customer's responsibility to report not receiving a bill.

printing and sending late notices to every customer that got a late charge no matter how big or small, a special mailing to tell the customer they just added that charge to their account. For anyone signed up for email, should they get such a charge, they can be notified simply and without all the time and expense of traditional postal mailings.

What's more, collecting email addresses would also provide an easy and inexpensive means for other customer contact like the aforementioned annual meeting notification or Consumer Confidence Report.

Our Kansas water system clients using email bills save valuable clerical time and typically save anywhere from \$150 to \$2,000 per month in mailing costs alone. Additionally, email bills save the water system: 1) paper and envelopes or billing card expense; and, 2) wear-and-tear on their printer, toner costs, and other office expenses.

Of course, this is only one of the ways the Internet can be put to good use in the workplace. The trick is to determine what choices the Internet provides that will be a boon for the utility system and not a detriment, disappointment, or security risk.

Backup, backup, backup!!!

On the day I finished this article, we had a customer, a new and inexperienced clerk, who made a gigantic mistake that could have been avoided by having a daily data backup of the utility system. When asked about her latest backup, she confidently stated that was not a problem because their office has contracted with a company to back up their computer system daily on the cloud. We contacted the service; they gave us the bad news about a technical problem this month which resulted in backup failures and the latest data they could

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provide was half a month old!

Once again, we cannot stress enough, even if a cloud backup service is used, don't leave it all to them! Take personal responsibility for backups! Daily use of a \$50 USB external drive or even a thumb drive, using our "one mouse click daily backup tool" would have backed up the data in about ten seconds and avoided the heartache of the kind of news one utility received today and all the extra hours of extra work that will result.

While Kansas water districts and cities will miss the valuable experiences, training, and advice of the annual March Kansas Rural Water Conference, we urge clerks, managers, boards and councils, etc., to seek out some of the people normally seen at the conference for support. Folks like water association staff, your utility software company support, meter systems support, other water systems personnel, etc. These experts in their fields may be able to provide perspectives that can help make 2021 a better year.



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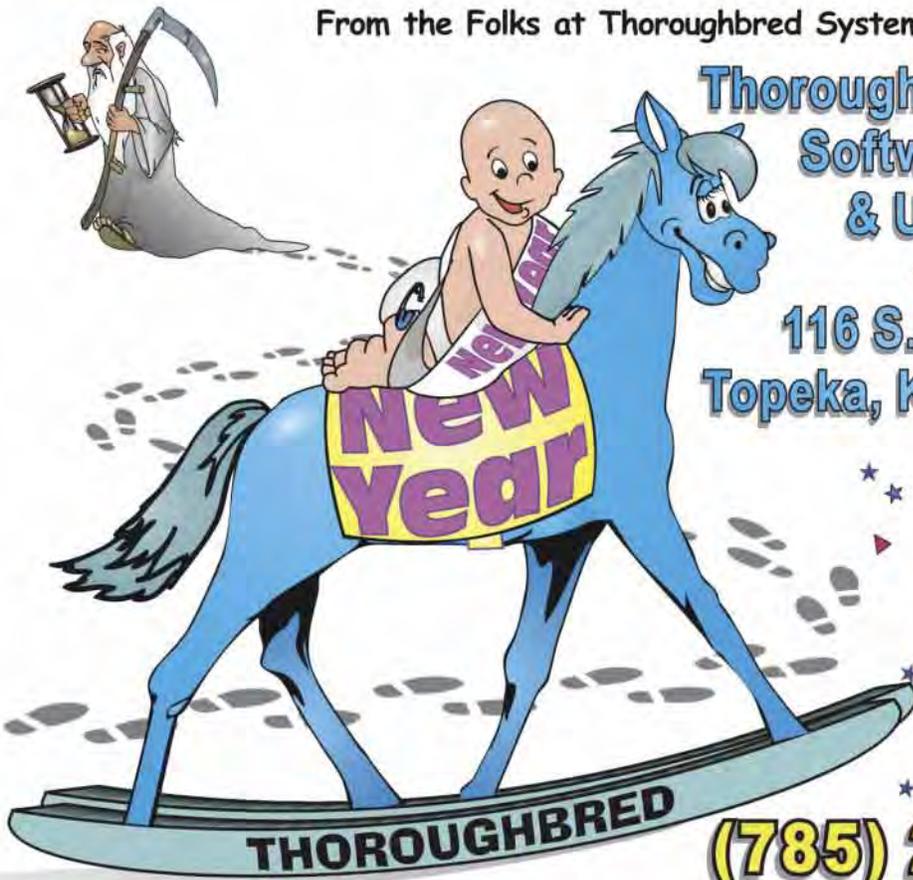
Working with folks in the water industry across this land, providing support for our utility management software and other programs we offer for cities and water districts, we hear from people all over about what their communities have dealt with this past year.

Some customers we've had for years have become old friends while others are new and counting on us to have their backs. From both, we hear of the adversities they've had to endure in their work and in their lives during this pandemic. Stories that range from frustration and inconvenience to heartbreak and tragedy.

It's just not enough this year to flippantly declare Happy New Year! We add our hopes and prayers to countless others that good health and normalcy should return to the country and the world in this new year.

To our customers and to others in the water and waste water industry, Thank You for your hard work and dedication. May you know only good health and prosperity in this NEW YEAR 2021.

From the Folks at Thoroughbred Systems



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