

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trending in an Instant

A Risk Communication
Guide for Water Utilities



rawpixel.com and Twin Design/Shutterstock.com



**American Water Works
Association**

Dedicated to the World's Most Important Resource®

September, 2022

Trending in an Instant:

A Risk Communication
Guide for Water Utilities

Water Utility Colleagues:

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 sensational communication challenges concerning water. *Trending in an Instant: A Risk Communication Guide for Water Utilities*, which is introduced in this Executive Summary, provides research into the psychology and behavior behind customer fears. More importantly, it delivers targeted tools and action steps to help you respond effectively before, during and after a high-profile communication issue at your utility.

This guide draws on the experience and expertise of fellow water professionals to ensure the advice provided is specific to the challenges faced by water utilities. Utility staff across North America graciously shared their field-tested tools, recommendations and lessons learned to help you plan for communication crises in your area.

The guide is intended to complement existing communication efforts at your utility, including crisis communications. A crisis communications plan is a critical tool to help utilities manage emergency situations, and we highly recommend incorporating information from the guide into your emergency management plans as a separate but equally critical planning tool.

We encourage you to leverage the combined experience of the utility community by reaching out to us and to your peers as you prepare risk communication strategies in your own organizations. The guide is a living document that will continue to be updated as the media and communication landscape evolves. This will ensure that utility communicators and staff always have the most current information and tools at their fingertips. AWWA members provide an essential and life-sustaining resource to customers across the world, and we are committed to supporting you in your important work.

Sincerely,

AWWA Public Affairs Council

Introduction

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 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.



Today's Context: Communicating in an Era of Distrust

While most utilities provide water and wastewater services that meet 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. **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 sources 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 customers' 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 critical to ensuring you're part of the conversation along with self-proclaimed experts.

The Silent Service Provider

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 has found that nearly half of all water utilities have no communication plan and no staff dedicated to communications and community outreach work. ([Strategic Communication Planning: A Guide for Water Utilities](#))



The Rise of Social Media

The explosion of social media has changed how we communicate, but water utilities overall have been slow adopters of these new communication channels. 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 expectation for engagement and information about decisions that affect them.

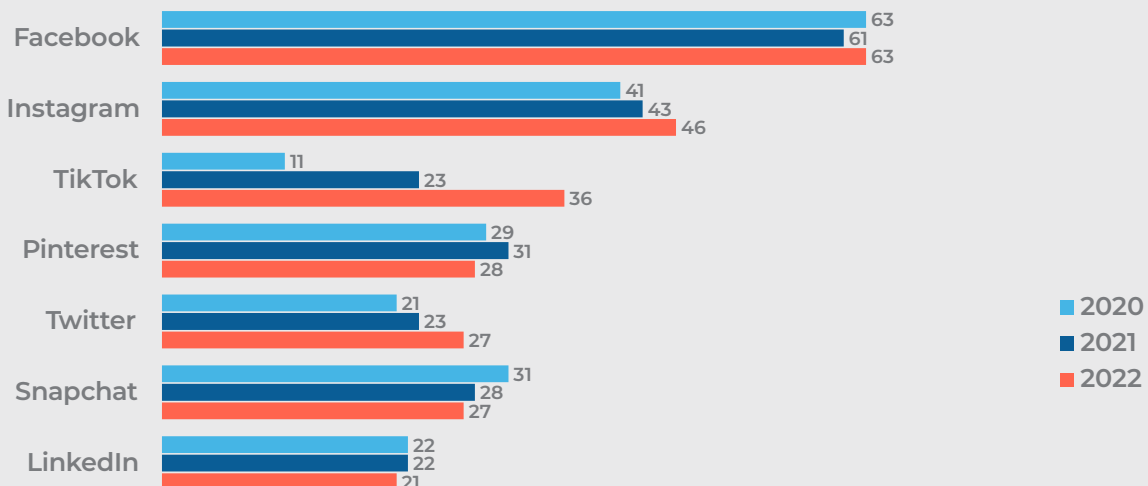
Indeed, social media has empowered the consumer. **If leveraged correctly, social media can build support for and provide understanding of public interest issues like drinking water and wastewater treatment. If ignored or used to spread misinformation, the result can cause devastating impacts for a water 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 activity on 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.

Social Media Brand Usage

THE INFINITE DIAL 2022

TOTAL U.S. POPULATION 12+
PERCENTAGE USING SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND



WONDERY



THE INFINITE DIAL ©2022 EDISON RESEARCH

#InfiniteDial

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 water utilities' past silence to establish themselves as influencers on water issues. Many of these voices are helpful in raising awareness of important issues and have a genuine interest in improving water quality and protecting the environment. However, some of these influencers 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 interested parties 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.



Mind Pro Studio/Shutterstock.com

Risk Communication Strategies Can Help

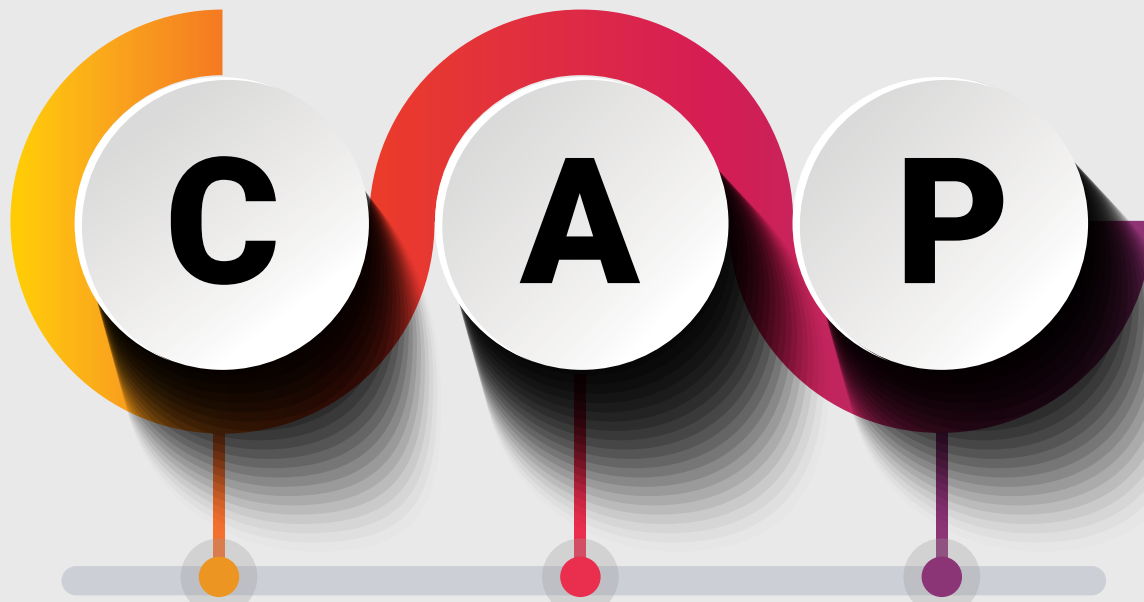
In 2002, Daniel Kahneman and Vernon Smith won the Nobel Prize in Economics for research demonstrating that when fear is present, people process information differently, and the science of risk communication was born. This research showed that when people are emotional, they shift their brains' information 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 help 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.

Science has found that specific communication techniques are effective for responding to people experiencing angst brought on by hype around an uncertain or unknown risk. These techniques have been summarized into easy-to-use templates developed by the Center for Risk Communication. See below example.

Example Template (CAP)

Use when responding to a high-concern question or statement.



Caring Message:

Provide a message indicating caring, concern, empathy or compassion. The message should communicate the seriousness of the situation.

Action Message:

State actions you have, are or will take to address the issue or problem. For example, the message might indicate you are cooperating with other organizations or investigating the situation.

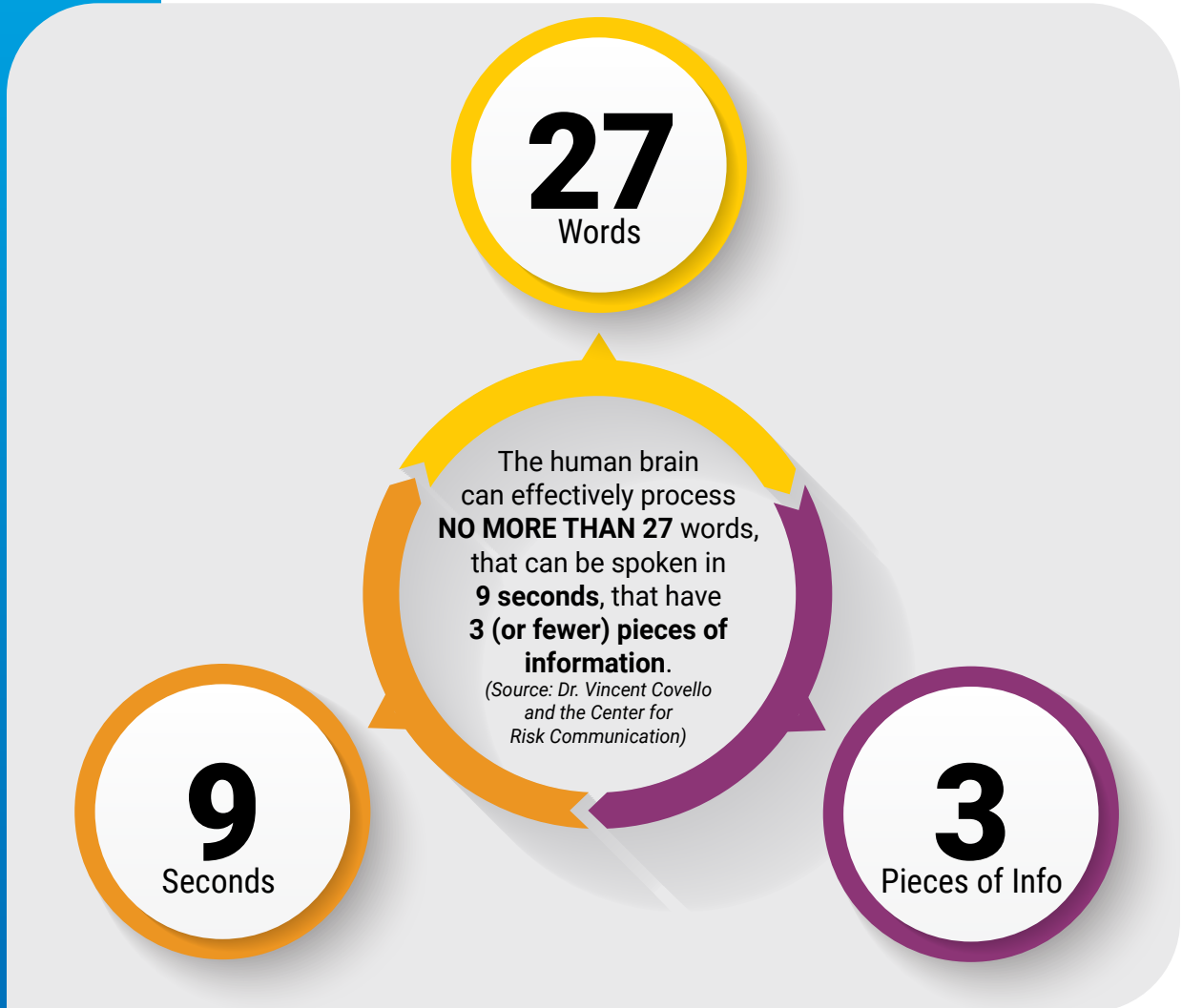
Perspective Message:

Provide information that puts the issue in perspective or context.

Less is More

When you are trying to move an individual from a heightened stage of fear, what you say and how you say it matter. The 27/9/3 Information Input Rule can be used in most any communications scenario.

27/9/3 Information Input Rule



Become the Trusted Source

The first time consumers hear from you should not be when there is a crisis. Water utilities can become the trusted source through proactive, regular communication and engagement. To be effective, the messages you share do not have to be slick, expensive or hard to develop.

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.

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.

3

Identify what the community wants to hear

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!

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 (see figure on page 8).

5

Deliver where they are listening

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.

6

Be strategic on social media

The best strategy is to be prepared. Create a social media policy, pay attention to what is being talked about and develop hypothetical responses to potentially negative comments.

Managing Social Media Events

The onset of a negative social media event can induce anxiety and fear in you and everyone in the utility. Having a plan of action for such an event can significantly reduce the anxiety and increase your ability to address all the nuanced needs effectively in a brief period.

Do we need to respond?

If you have received comments on your social media channels, respond to the inquiry directly, reach out to the poster through a private message, then monitor the situation. If in doubt, use the checklist of questions below to help you determine if you should respond.

1. Who will decide?

- If you do not have an established communication team, gather the utility spokesperson (often the general manager, a topic-specific technical expert and public relations staff, if you have them).
- Should anyone from the outside be included?

2. What information do you have available to help you decide?

- Define the topic
 - What is the specific set of issues, timing, utility actions, etc. being raised?
 - What is your utility's role around this specific set of issues?
- Articulate the consequences
 - Is this a crisis or annoyance?
 - What are the possibilities and probabilities of the event growing?
 - What is the reach, if on traditional or social media, of the platform? How many people are currently connected and what is the potential for growth?
- Characterize the participants
 - How concerned are your customers? How many are involved?
 - How concerned is your utility's governing body?
 - Is an advocacy group involved?
 - Are the interested parties part of a specific group? Are they considered trusted sources?
 - Does someone else in the community have the lead on this?
 - Is another agency counting on you to take the lead?
- Characterize the context
 - Have other utilities experienced this and had it escalate?
 - How is my community likely to respond to this kind of event?
 - Are there other local, state and national news stories that may have an effect?

Who do we respond to? What do we say?

Consider how you will respond, and what you will say, to each audience and on each delivery platform.

- Always start and end by communicating with **your employees**.
- **Governing members, city councils and other local officials** want enough information to feel informed and to be able to respond effectively. Provide them with the guide's included Quick Response Sheets (if applicable) and the information you provide to your employees.
- **Health departments and primary agencies** are also important. These agencies may be good sources for more information.
- Regardless of the forum, remember you are always talking to **the public**.



Vasin Lee/Shutterstock.com

How do we react to negative social media publicity?

The nature of social media makes it ripe for misinformation, and advocacy groups may use this to their advantage. The result can be a situation where a utility must react to a rising tide of criticism in real time on its social media platforms. In this situation, there are eight key steps you can take to help maintain control.

Respond quickly. Respond in short order even if you must provide a “hold message” to the commenter letting them (and those who are watching) know you are looking into the issue.

1

Use a human tone. Upset customers need empathy and a friendly, caring tone. The words you use when you are communicating in the spotlight matter a lot.

2

Tailor your responses. It is very tempting to quickly respond to a complaint or concern with a link to your website. Instead, acknowledge the concern directly.

3

Take responsibility. Ignoring a customer’s concern will aggravate them and potentially others who may be watching for your response. Take responsibility if this situation is something under your control.

4

Be visible. Unless the comments you are receiving contain violent or offensive language, be transparent and open when responding to negative social media.

5

Try to move commenters offline. When responding to comments that would be better handled by phone or in-person, offer to do just that.

6

Pause scheduled social media posts. If you are dealing with a risk communication situation on social media, nothing is worse than having a fun, quirky post pop up in the middle of it.

7

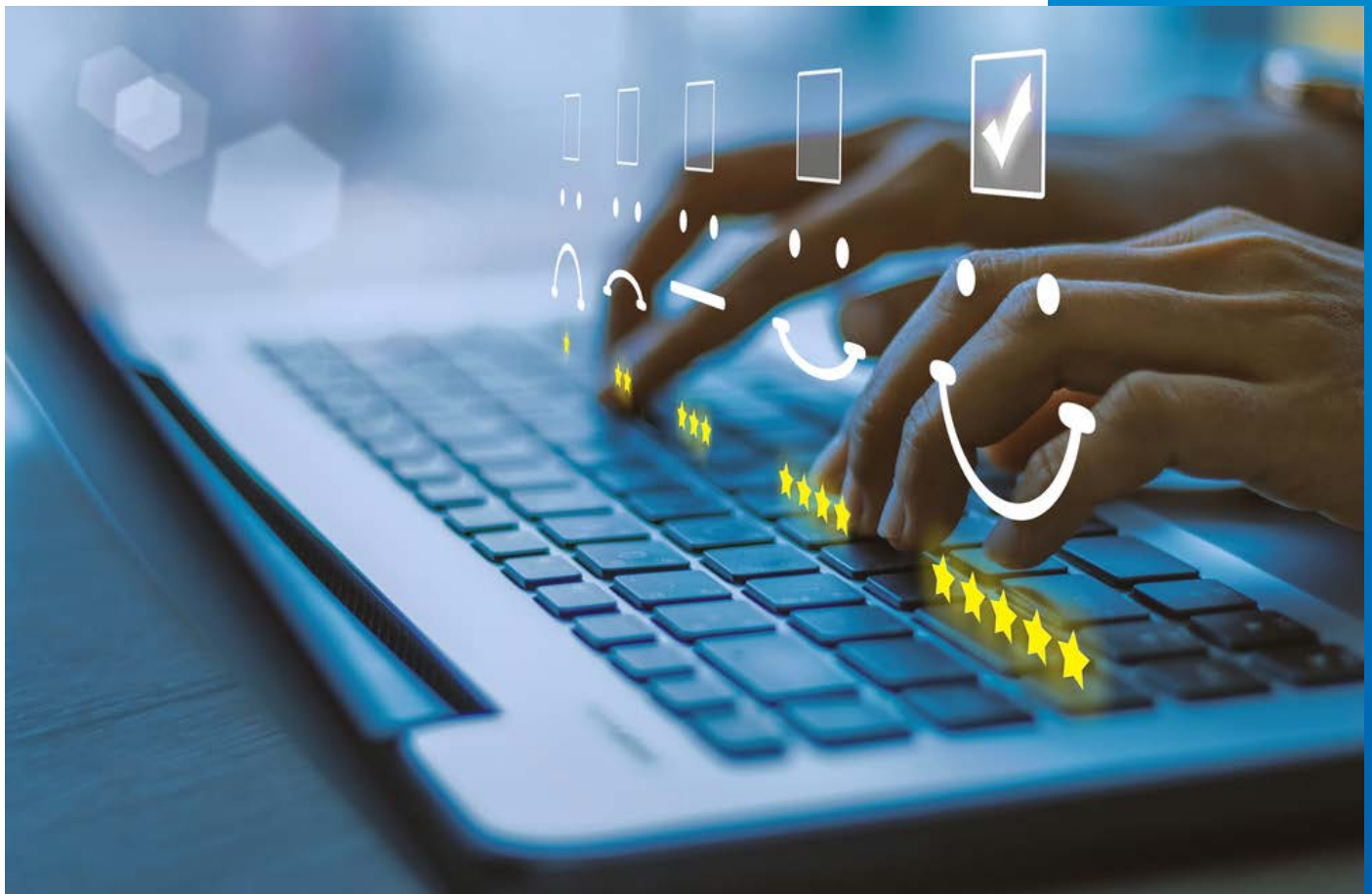
Communicate internally about your social media interactions. Ensure everyone in your organization is on the same page about who will speak and what will be said to prevent misinformation from spreading.

8

Do's and Don'ts for responding to a social media attack

Social Media Spotlight Do's and Don'ts

Do	Don't
Respond quickly – within hours	Wait and see, and respond days later
Take the conversation offline	Engage with the customer extensively about their concern on the platform
Use a human tone, expressing empathy	Respond in “corporate speak”
Tailor your responses to the comment	Make the same generic response to every comment
Assume good intent	Take comments personally and respond in kind
Look into the issue quickly and post the resolution	Ignore the issue
Allow negative comments to be posted (if it meets your policy)	Delete negative comments
Monitor all your comments	“Set it and forget it” and check on your social media accounts infrequently
Thank positive commenters	Ignore those who take the time to tell you you're doing a good job



13_Phunkod/Shutterstock.com

Engage the Public in Person

Consider meeting and talking to the public where they are. Find existing community meetings and ask to present or provide information to attendees. Look for neighborhood association meetings, homeowners' associations, town halls hosted by local elected officials, community groups, rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, etc. In some cases, it may be valuable to host your own event to ensure your message comes across accurately and to show your responsiveness in person as you spend time talking to your customers and answering their questions.

Some techniques to consider:

Partner with a third-party advocate to host informational events. Aqua Pennsylvania and Horsham Water and Sewer worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Navy, local health departments and the state department of environmental protection to hold two outreach events to inform the community about per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). They used a science fair format that was highly successful at creating a one-on-one educational experience rather than a forum for mob response. EPA trained participants and provided messaging and informational material.

Provide tours. North Texas Municipal Water District invited a local water quality advocacy group to a briefing and tour of their treatment plant to have a conversation to help allay fears and provide information.

Attend community events. The City of Ann Arbor developed a calendar of "Water Pop-up Events". Staff trained to talk about water treatment and water quality "dropped in" to existing events (farmers' markets, library events, community festivals, etc.) to answer questions and provide information. They have created a water drop mascot that attends these events with staff to welcome people and spark interest.



ice-talk/Shutterstock.com

Communication Guides and Tools

[Strategic Communication Planning: A Guide for Water Utilities](#). Mobley, J., E. Tatham, K. Reinhart, and C. Tatham. 2006. Project #2955. The Water Research Foundation.

[AWWA Public Communications Toolkit](#).

- [Relationships with Local Media](#).

[AWWA G420-17 Communication and Customer Relations](#).

[Communicating Water's Value: Talking Points, Tips & Strategies](#). Goetz, M. 2014. AWWA.

[Crisis and Issue Communications Learning Together During the COVID -19 Experience](#). 2020. AWWA.

[Risk Communication](#). 2017. AWWA.

[Public Notice – Getting the Message Out: A Boil Water Advisory and Customer Response](#). 2015. AWWA.

[Communication Without Words: How Utilities Can Become Visible to Their Customers](#). 2015. AWWA.

Social Media Guides and Tools

[Social Media for Water Utilities](#). Eckl, E., A. Huisman, E. Alferez, and M. Brandt. 2017. Project #4638. The Water Research Foundation.

[Social Media Monitoring for Water Quality Surveillance and Response Systems](#), Mix, N., A. George, and A. Haas. Journal AWWA, 2020.

[Eleven myths about social media every utility manager should know—and how to overcome them](#), Villegas, S., Journal AWWA, 2013.

[Are You Ready for the TV Cameras? Communicating with the Media and the Public Following Negative Incidents](#), Hoffman, J., J. Moyer. Journal AWWA, 2007.



American Water Works
Association



Join us in creating a better world through better water.

The American Water Works Association is an international, nonprofit, scientific and educational society dedicated to providing total water solutions assuring the effective management of water. Founded in 1881, the Association is the largest organization of water supply professionals in the world.

BECOME A MEMBER

Connect with a community of people who are dedicated to total water solutions. Receive discounts on conferences and technical publications.

VOLUNTEER

Join one of our more than 160 technical committees and help shape the future of the water sector.

PUBLISH WITH AWWA

Share your ideas with other water professionals by writing a book or contributing to one of our award-winning publications, *Journal AWWA* and *Opflow*.

SPEAK AT A CONFERENCE

Make your mark as an industry thought leader by presenting at an AWWA conference or training event.



**American Water Works
Association**

Dedicated to the World's Most Important Resource®

JOIN now at
www.awwa.org