COVID-19: Communication Strategies for the Water Sector

ISSUE: YOUR TAP WATER IS SAFE

Water is playing an essential role in everyone’s health and well-being during the public health crisis brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Clean, reliable, and accessible water service is fundamental to public health and thriving communities. As water professionals, we know COVID-19 has not been detected in drinking water supplies, and no evidence suggests the virus survives the disinfection process. But the general public may be unaware.

At this time of panic and uncertainty, people are turning to bottled water at a considerable expense to their wallets and the environment while tap water remains safe to drink. It is normal to have fear, but as water professionals we have an obligation and a mission to inform people that in this crisis, they can rely on the safety of their tap water. How can water utilities reassure their customers and dispel myths about water quality? How can other water sector stakeholders effectively communicate with their constituencies about the safety of drinking water supplies?

The Value of Water Campaign prepared this fact sheet to provide tips for communicating about the safety of drinking water supplies. It also highlights some great examples of how supporters of the Value of Water Campaign use successful approaches through social media. More examples can be found on the Value of Water Campaign COVID Response Page.

We hope this round-up of tips and examples helps empower water sector stakeholders to communicate the value and safety of drinking tap water during the COVID-19 crisis.

Lead with Empathy

Empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of another—is the foundation for any effective crisis communications. In moments of crisis, people look for validation of their concerns. Your fact-based messages about the safety of drinking water supplies are more likely to resonate when conveyed with empathy. This can be as simple as acknowledging people’s fear or uncertainty before providing key points.
Be Early, Be Proactive

People are more likely to remember and trust the first message they hear in an emergency. When an organization is proactive and communicates immediately in an emergency, it shows its credibility and readiness. If water utilities stay silent, that leaves a gap where less credible or accurate sources of information may fill. Haven’t communicated yet with your customers? It’s okay. Start now and maintain consistent frequency and tone of messaging.

Emphasize the Role of Treatment

Research shows that highlighting the effective treatment processes that make tap water safe is an effective way to build customers’ trust in the quality of their water supply. It’s important to use accessible, easy-to-understand language. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Be cautious with words or phrases that could be perceived as negative by people outside the water sector. Instead of communicating messages that emphasize compliance with federal water quality standards, use messages that describe the extensive treatment that results in safe drinking water. People do not need an in-depth description of every engineering component or chemical reaction, but customers want and expect technical information about water quality and treatment from their utilities.

Communicate Frequently

People are understandably anxious, and they want information. The more you provide steady, consistent messaging that tap water is something customers don’t need to worry about, the better. Use every communication channel you have available, social media, email newsletters, signage, bill inserts, and more. Consider how you can engage other influencers in your community who can spread the word, local news stations, newspapers, local elected officials, school districts and more. For example, city council members and schools regularly put out information about COVID-19. Give them easy-to-use information to share on their social media platforms and in e-newsletters and talking points.

Humor

Humor can humanize your message, convey empathy, and make water utilities appear more personal. It can be effective when used in appropriate settings. It can be well suited for social media, especially if humor is part of your organization’s online brand. Do not use humor in press announcements, as humor often will not translate well in such messages.
Show the Human Side

Your customers are receiving a lot of information right now, and you are competing for their attention. The most effective message needs a compelling, human narrative. Narratives help increase trust and improve knowledge retention. Tell the story of your treatment process and organization’s resiliency through the people doing the work. Storytelling through effective images and visuals is compelling. Share your treatment process in a cellphone video by an operator. Feature photos of the people hard at work keeping the water safe to drink, and in the office and working remotely, keeping the lights on.

Communicating in an emergency comes down to being credible, empathetic, and communicating openly, honestly, and frequently. Water utilities are a trusted source of information for their customers, and have a critical role to play in providing vital public health information during this public health crisis.

Additional Resources


About the Value of Water Campaign

The Value of Water Campaign educates and inspires the nation about how water is essential, invaluable, and in need of investment. Spearheaded by top leaders in the water industry, the Value of Water Campaign is building public and political will for investment in America’s water infrastructure. To learn more: www.thevalueofwater.org

If you would like to learn more, share ideas, or get involved with the Value of Water Campaign, please contact Katie Henderson, Program Manager: khenderson@uswateralliance.org.