

MESSAGING FOR RESULTS

Communicating Critical Water Issues

About this toolkit

In our interconnected world, effective communication is much like water: essential, transformative, and capable of breaking barriers. As we navigate an era marked by unprecedented challenges and opportunities in the water sector, learning how to effectively communicate—whether among peers, community members, or elected officials—has never been more critical. At the US Water Alliance, we believe strategic communications play a significant role in shaping an equitable, sustainable, and resilient One Water future—and the more we understand how to engage with one another around key issues, the better equipped we'll be to advance that vision.

To help our members and the broader field take action on key topics in the movement, we study how to strategically have conversations about the opportunities and challenges we face and find the most effective ways to drive awareness, influence policy, and inspire collective action toward a One Water future. This year's research projects address affordability, regional partnerships, climate action, and infrastructure investment and seek to make anyone hoping to champion these issues a more effective communicator.

WHAT'S INSIDE:

01 | BUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AFFORDABILITY AND ASSISTANCE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS:

Read about messaging tactics to engage and inform communities about pressing water access issues.

02 | MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS:

Learn more about public perspectives on water system regional partnerships, including data-informed tips for starting the conversation with community members.

03 | EMPOWERING WATER UTILITY LEADERS TO BE A FORCE FOR THE GREATER GOOD THROUGH CLIMATE MITIGATION:

Browse findings about effective ways to engage water sector leaders in the climate and water conversation.

01 | Building Public Support for Water Assistance Programs

Access to safe and reliable water is fundamental to the health of our communities, the well-being of our families, and our prosperity and dignity. However, costs related to inflation, water utility operations and maintenance, repairs to aging infrastructure, and much-needed innovations are rising. Substantial investments in our water systems are needed for a more secure water future. Still, in the US, local residents largely bear cost increases and an increasing number of households cannot pay their bills.

Easing the financial burden on struggling households and the utilities that serve them will take collective effort and investment in water—from the federal to the individual level. To make universal, affordable water access a nationwide priority, leaders in the water sector can benefit from understanding what messages motivate people to support water assistance policies and programs.

To investigate this question, the US Water Alliance conducted an A/B comparative messaging test using paid social media to understand which messaging angles are most effective for reaching and engaging consumers around water assistance efforts in different regions of the US. This test culminated in a series of dos and don'ts for communicating with consumers nationwide.

MESSAGING ANGLES TESTED

Leveraging existing messaging strategy research and expert opinions from water sector leaders, we developed five messaging angles to test:



URGENCY: Emphasize the immediate need for universal water access and the human impact we must address (i.e., the number of people who currently struggle to pay their water bill)



FUTURE GENERATIONS: Appeal to notions of legacy and the importance of thoughtful stewardship for future generations



FINANCIAL BENEFIT: Draw the connection between strong economies and access to clean water



PUBLIC HEALTH: Focus on the link between public health outcomes and universal water access



SOCIAL PRESSURE: Leverage public polling data to demonstrate that like-minded peers support water assistance programs

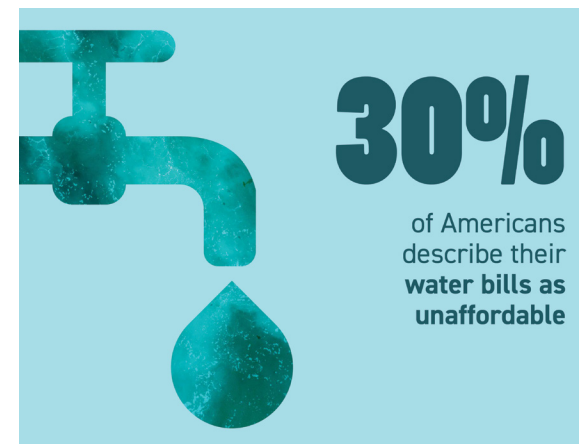
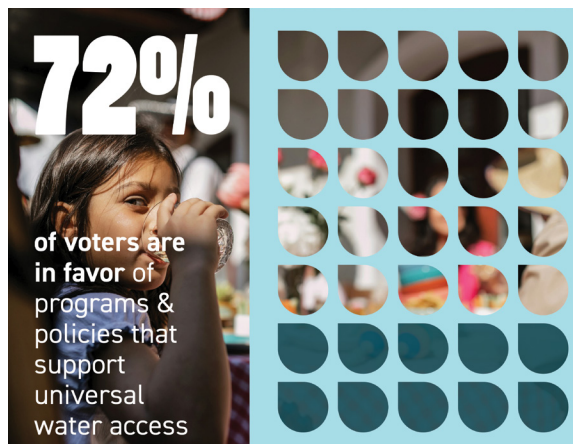
MESSAGING “DOS”

- ↑ **Leverage polling data to elicit social pressure.** Social pressure was the top-performing messaging angle in our test. When using social pressure messaging, reference majority opinion and bipartisan support statistics—such as those found in the [Value of Water Index](#)—to make a case for customer assistance programs. For example, the social pressure message that performed best in this study mentioned how “72 percent of voters are in favor of programs and policies that support universal water access.”
- ↑ **Use concrete numbers over ranges or generalizations.** Messages that included vague estimations did not perform as well as those variations that included concrete percentages. Of the two social pressure messages tested, the ad including the statistic “72 percent of voters are in favor of programs and policies that support universal water access” far outperformed the ad that stated “people in your area are rallying behind local water assistance programs.”
- ↑ **Highlight tangible data points and statistics to show the urgency and impact of water affordability issues.** The second highest-performing messaging angle was urgency. Of the two urgency messages tested, the one using the specific impact statement that “17 percent of US households struggle to afford basic water services” from Duke University’s research performed best. While not tested in this study, the 2024 Value of Water Index also found that 30 percent of Americans now describe their water bills as unaffordable, a data point that could also be put to use in an urgency-oriented message.
- ↑ **Use questions to keep your audience engaged.** Messaging that posed the question, “Are families near you living without access to clean water?” outperformed variations where the impact was stated rather than posed as a question (i.e., “millions of Americans live without access to clean water”).

MESSAGING “DON'Ts”

- ↓ **Lean on appeals to public health.** While these messages perform well when building public support for water infrastructure investments, audiences do not resonate with messaging that highlights the water-public health nexus as a motivator to support customer assistance programs.
- ↓ **Rely on the economic/financial benefits of customer assistance programs to drive customer support.** While these may sway elected officials or other audience segments, messages that highlighted the economic/job creation benefits of water assistance programs were among the least engaging messages nationwide. For example, the ad that leaned into the statement “by supporting local water assistance programs, you can contribute to job creation, stimulate local economies, and help build thriving communities” was among the worst performing.
- ↓ **Describe the benefits of water assistance programs in vague terms.** Messages that emphasized unquantified, abstract concepts like “job creation,” “public health,” “community well-being,” and a “legacy of equal opportunity” were not as effective as messages that relied on concrete data points and quantifiable impact.

EXAMPLES



**ARE FAMILIES
NEAR YOU
LIVING
WITHOUT
ACCESS TO
CLEAN
WATER?**

02 | Building Public Support for Community-Driven Regional Water Partnerships

As climate impacts accelerate across the country and water affordability issues mount, our communities are facing increasing challenges. From the need to diversify water supplies to the urgency to invest in climate-forward planning and infrastructure, the opportunity to advance regional water partnerships has never been greater.

Well-designed and community-led water system partnerships can better address unfunded investment gaps; achieve predictable, consistent revenue; combat affordability pressure and environmental justice issues; provide a stronger basis for local economic growth; support resilience; enhance capacity to meet modern treatment standards; and leverage innovation opportunities in the water sector more readily.

Engaging community members at every level of the utility partnership process is key to realizing these benefits and ensuring equity in the process and results. To pursue community-driven regional partnerships, leaders in the water sector can benefit from understanding existing levels of community awareness of regional partnership options, what motivates people to support regional partnerships, and what concerns may arise.

To investigate these questions, **the US Water Alliance conducted a nationwide survey evaluating public sentiment toward regional utility partnerships and the messaging angles most likely to shift or positively influence community member perspectives.**

The most significant finding? Community members want a voice. 96.3 percent of Americans think it is important for community members to have a say in decision-making processes regarding water utility partnerships in their region (with over 60 percent of respondents indicating it is “essential” or “very important”). 60.5 percent reported they would be more likely to support regional water utility partnerships if the ultimate governance structure maintains a degree of local control, community involvement, and representation.

MESSAGING “DOs”

- ↑ **Highlight the potential for lower costs per customer as a result of regional partnerships.** As the costs of providing safe, reliable water and sanitation increase nationally, knowing their share of those costs is as low as possible is appealing to customers. Across regions surveyed, consumers reported “lower operational costs per customer” as the most likely advantage to positively influence their perspective overall.
- ↑ **Emphasize the opportunity for safer /higher-quality water and service equity regional partnerships can create.** Aside from a lower cost share burden, highly-ranked messages included, “address disparities in reliable access to safe water and sewer services within and across communities” and “enhanced water quality and safety measures.”
- ↑ **Communicate benefits early and often.** Share top-performing anticipated benefits before and throughout the process. Results show a significant increase in support for partnerships after exposure to potential benefits.
- ↑ **Address customers’ fears about monopolies, rising costs, and unethical business practices.** The most commonly reported consumer concerns about regional water partnerships include trepidation about higher costs, community member disenfranchisement, poor water quality, and the potential for inequity among different communities.
- ↑ **Take a community-driven approach.** Consumers are broadly supportive of community-driven regionalization efforts with 96.3 percent believing it is important for community members to have a say in the decision-making process.

MESSAGING “DON'Ts”

- ↓ **Make appeals to job creation.** According to the collected data, the least influential message to positively impact community perspectives on regional partnerships was, “more skilled employees to run and maintain water operations.” While jobs-focused messaging has been anecdotally influential among elected officials and government employees, it is not influential in public communications about regional partnerships.
- ↓ **Rely on resilience or environmental sustainability messages.** The second and third least influential messages to positively impact community perspectives were, “greater resilience in the wake of extreme weather events” and “more environmentally sustainable water management practices.”
- ↓ **Assume anyone’s level of understanding of the regional partnership process.** 51.3 percent of American voters reported that they did not know what regional water system partnerships were. Introduce people to the concept of regional partnerships as part of the key messages.

EXAMPLES



03 | A Call for Climate Mitigation in the Water Sector: Messaging Strategies to Move Water Leaders to Action

Water is the cornerstone of healthy, thriving communities, and the rapidly changing climate poses an unprecedented threat to our ability to manage life's most precious resource. Climate change is already impacting watersheds and water systems across the country and Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color; low-income communities; and other historically underserved populations are being hit the hardest.

Without urgent collective action to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, these impacts will intensify. No sector can sit on the sidelines, yet for too long, water has been overlooked as a strategic source of climate solutions. The water sector can play a key role in protecting communities, taking action to address water sector emissions, and deploying One Water approaches to reach the ambitious climate goals across our communities. The successful adoption of climate mitigation solutions for water systems hinges on gaining the approval and buy-in of a critical mass of water managers. That's why understanding what can influence sector attitudes about climate action is crucial.

To empower climate action innovators and advocates in the water sector with effective communications strategies to engage peers and industry influencers, we conducted an experiment using paid media to determine the most engaging messaging strategies around climate mitigation among water leaders.

MESSAGING ANGLES TESTED

Leveraging existing messaging strategy research and expert opinions from water sector leaders, we developed six messaging angles to test:



URGENCY: Highlighting the immediate need for climate action to prevent further impacts



AVAILABLE SOLUTIONS: Showcasing emerging solutions for reducing utility emissions



COST OF INACTION: Emphasizing the financial and operational consequences of not addressing climate change



FORCE FOR GREATER GOOD: Encouraging collective action to meet community climate goals and needs



ACCOUNTABILITY: Promoting transparency and proactive emission tracking



AVAILABLE FUNDING: Highlighting the availability of historic funding for climate mitigation efforts

We found that emphasizing “Force for Greater Good” and “Cost of Inaction” messaging resulted in the highest level of engagement, especially when paired with a video that featured a compilation of expert voices (rather than a singular expert). Below are several key takeaways to inform future climate communications efforts within the water sector:

MESSAGING GUIDELINES

Use consequence-focused language (vs. incentive-focused language) to get peers engaged and invested. In our study, water leaders were significantly more likely to click through to a climate mitigation landing page when served consequence-focused language (i.e., “water leaders—don’t pay the price of climate inaction”) vs. incentive-focused language (i.e., “water leaders—save money, build overall sustainability through climate mitigation”).

Emphasize the cost of inaction on climate mitigation for water systems. Messages that highlighted the financial and physical costs of climate inaction outperformed messaging angles that focused on the availability of funding and solutions as well as the responsibility of water managers to take an active role in achieving net-zero emissions.

Position taking climate mitigation action as a force for the greater good, encouraging collective action to meet community climate goals and needs.

Use multiple voices in various roles to make your case. In our study, a video featuring many expert voices on the benefits and urgency of climate mitigation outperformed shorter videos that featured just one expert voice.

EXAMPLES

