Using Today’s Communications Landscape to Gain Support for Infrastructure Funding

Mike McGill, President
The Instant Information Age

- We live in The Instant Information Age
- Your customers receive the news they want WITHOUT needing to ask for it
- They expect timely information, especially from the people they pay for services
- You need to meet these expectations to gain/retain customer & stakeholder support
The Instant Information Age

- Limited outreach budgets, staff time
- With minimal commitment, you can add outreach
- For everyone’s benefit. You, customers, electeds.
- Mindful of apprehension. Been burned before...
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- Mindful of apprehension. Been burned before...
- Common sense. Use proven methods, messages.
- Achieve short-term goals (customer information)
- Achieve long-term goals (relationship building, support for funding)
Today’s Media Landscape

- Mass media influence/operations shrinking BUT...
  - STILL #1 for mass messaging to public/customers
  - Expectations to communicate w/media remain high
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- Web, Social Media
  - Direct path to the public on any matter. Cuts both ways.
  - Faster than mass media. Forces them to speed up work.
  - Increased pressure. Constant need to hold attention.
  - Influencers need fresh content to stay relevant
  - Provides rapid response to misinformation
“More with Less”

- Media/Key Stakeholders: “Doing more with less.”
- Communicate with this in mind
- BE PROACTIVE. Reach out before you must do it.
- Put yourself in their shoes. Info gap? They will fill it.
- Invest in the relationships. Take time to bridge gaps.
- Make it easier on for them to understand your work.
- Stronger relationships result in greater understanding, support for future funding
Social Media

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  - Anyone can gain disproportionate attention
  - Doesn’t matter if true. Anger treated with respect.
  - Easy for media to cover w/little commitment
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- You CAN use it your short & long-term benefits
  - Easy for press to cover w/little commitment
  - Direct path to your customers without filter
  - Engagement gains greater respect, understanding
  - Invaluable "trust" tool during emergencies
Benefits of Proactive Outreach

• If utilities communicate, they build public trust
• VITAL trust for rate increases, infrastructure projects, water quality concerns, & emergencies
• PROOF: J.D. Power Water Utility surveys. 40,000 customers, 87 utilities across the nation.
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• Satisfaction scores 20% higher when customers remembered ONE proactive communication in 3 months

• Best results from consistent COMMS: Customers recalling SIX or more COMMS in 12 months gave 30% higher scores
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• If you talk to the public, they align with your needs

• PROOF: Portland State 2018 Study
  • Clear gaps exist between public & utilities
    • Public concerned about cost, supply/quality
    • Utilities concerned about aging infrastructure
  • Elected officials caught in between
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• Study: Boosted COMMS gained support for “needs”
  • “The more the utility communicated, the more customers aligned themselves with the utility.”
  • “Informing residents... key to building resilient systems.”

• “Must take action” messaging also important
Move the Needle. Plan & GO.

➢ Tried-and-true approaches

• Must become/remain GO-TO source for public info
• Requires preparation, commitment. STAY proactive.
• Variety of approaches can be used
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- Where to start?
  - What are your goals? Don’t overthink, use gut. Your customers do.
  - Honest assessments. Strengths AND weaknesses.
  - Develop content w/customers in mind
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➢ Opportunities to tell your story
  • Dozens of ideas that require modest preparation
  • Just about every aspect of your work can become content
  • Calls for help boost recognition of infrastructure
  • Crises can actually become opportunities
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- Boost your outreach. Overcome scar tissue.
  - Utilities are targets for anger. Address it with positives.
  - Boost your availability, openness. Yes, on social media too.
  - More you engage, more you are heard
  - 5% v. 95% reality for online engagement
Move the Needle. Plan & GO.

- How to get the messages out, build relationships
  - Standard methods:
    - Press releases, Web content, board meetings.
    - Bill messages/inserts, basic use of social media (announcement)
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How to get the messages out, build relationships

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• Intermediate methods:
  • **Big projects or plans? Media briefings. Key stakeholder briefings.**
  • Expanded use of social media (engagement)
  • Community outreach, presentations
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- **Advanced methods:**
  - Write an op-ed. 700 words of your choosing in a prime, "influencer" location.
  - Take reporters/stakeholders “behind-the-curtain”
Other Tools to Use

- COMMS Materials & Social Media Content:
  - Write, produce print & online materials that effectively communicate key messages:
    - Customer education brochures, bill inserts, flyers
    - Annual Reports (Excellent with key stakeholders.)
    - Web updates. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram use.
    - Customer/project newsletters
Messages That WORK

➤ Rate Increases for Infrastructure Funding

➤ We must rebuild our infrastructure
  • Parents & grandparents built finest systems in the world
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- Water is still a tremendous value
  - Bargain compared to what we pay for other “essentials”
  - Tested thousands of times to ensure highest quality
  - Tenths of a cent/gallon AND home delivered
The Value of Your Water

(Price per Gallon)

Public water is a great deal!

$3.00                $4.00
$13.00               $32.00

.5 CENTS

$1 of drinking water fills 2,400 BOTTLES of water.
Savings: $3,600 (@1.50 per 16 oz.)
The Value of Your Water
(Price per Day)

Public water is a great deal!

$3.50 $4.85 $5.10 $17.42 $18.20 $1.75

$1 of drinking water fills 2,400 BOTTLES of water.
Savings: $3,600 (@1.50 per 16 oz.)
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- COMMS boosts satisfaction, earns trust, & builds support
- Overcome scar tissue, social media apprehension
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• Clear gaps exist between customers, utilities about “needs”
• Political leaders are caught in the middle
• Bridge the gaps with proactive communications
• Clear, proven benefits. J.D. Power & Portland State results.
• COMMS boosts satisfaction, earns trust, & builds support
• Overcome scar tissue, social media apprehension
• Create, implement short, long-term COMMS plans
• Build relationships. Use proven approaches & messages.
• Proven way to gain support for infrastructure funding
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