

What every operator should know about public outreach

Patricia Tennyson



Knowledge	Principle	Practical considerations
Communication	Giving or exchanging of information.	<p>Gone are the days when utilities were proud to be the “silent service.” Issues of rates, construction effects, treatment levels, and environmental protection are but a few of the topics that require utilities to maintain open lines of communication with the public.</p> <p>There are three types of communication, and all are important: written, verbal, and nonverbal. Written communication takes many forms – bill inserts, Web notices, articles. It should be free of jargon and easy for the average person to understand. Verbal communication has to be genuine and consistent. And nonverbal communication – what is communicated through behavior, posture, eye contact, tone, and emotion – is extremely important and often can override what is said to customers or community members.</p>
Public	A group of people tied together by some common factor.	<p>There is not simply one public. There are many publics, also referred to as “audiences” or “stakeholders.” The effort a utility makes to build strong relationships with each of these groups will pay dividends over the long term. Publics, or audiences, are either internal or external:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal: Utility employees, contractors, board members, retirees, and even employee family members. All of these have a keen interest in utility issues and often are utility spokespersons whether officially designated or not. • External: Customers; community groups; elected officials; and business, civic, and other interest group leaders. These all have an interest in the business of the utility for many reasons, and the utility must build relationships with them. Often, these relationships are built by utility employees who work in the field and interact frequently with these individuals or groups.
Public outreach or community relations	Building relationships with audience members or publics.	<p>Public outreach involves strategic efforts to proactively contact various internal and external audiences to build relationships, associate a face with the utility’s name, and raise awareness about important utility issues.</p> <p>Outreach activities also can create and build partnerships, involve interested customers and community members in discussions about utility issues, help form mutual understanding, engender trust, reduce conflict, and ultimately lead to more-effective projects or initiatives.</p> <p>To be successful, outreach must be consistent, sustained, and timely. It must be “multifaceted,” meaning the utility uses a combination of outreach activities, such as presentations, fact sheets, special events, displays, and more to provide information.</p> <p>How well this information is received and believed relies heavily on an organization’s credibility.</p>

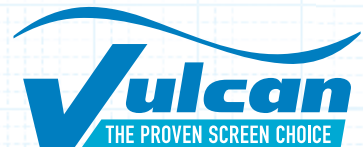
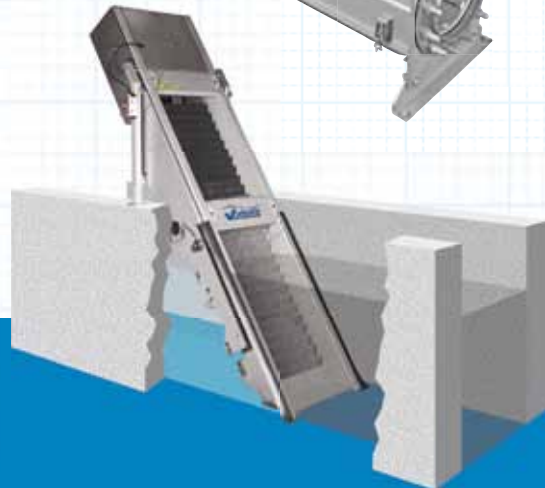
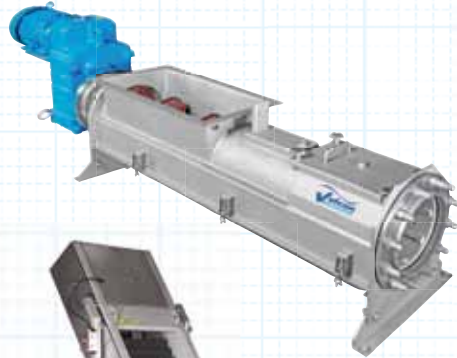


John Clarke

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Credibility	The ability to have one's truthfulness or honesty accepted.	<p>Credibility is earned – and organizational credibility is largely earned by actions and practices of the people who represent the utility.</p> <p>There are things that every utility representative can do to build credibility. These include returning calls promptly, providing information as promised, taking positive approaches to problems, listening first and acting second, showing sincerity, and being straightforward. These things may sound simple, but they are vitally important to building organizational credibility – particularly during difficult times.</p>
Strategic communication plan	A proactive and measurable plan that identifies why a utility wants to communicate, what it wants to communicate, with whom it needs to communicate, and what methods and activities are best to reach various audiences.	<p>Just as utilities have guidance documents for operations or capital improvement programs, they also need a planned, systematic program for public outreach. A strategic communication plan maximizes limited resources and ensures that the entire organization – from management to customer service to field operations and engineering – are working from the same “playbook” when it comes to communicating with customers and other publics.</p> <p>Strategic communication plans analyze issues, identify audiences, set goals and objectives, articulate key messages, and outline activities that will reach audiences. Front-line personnel are critical to implementing this strategic plan and should be a part of its development and use.</p>
Communication protocol	Written practices, processes, and assignments to ensure that all are aware of communication roles and responsibilities, and that accuracy and consistency are maintained no matter who is communicating.	<p>Does everyone know what to do when a news camera and microphone appear at the scene of a system emergency?</p> <p>A communication protocol ensures that each person knows where to direct the media, how to politely respond while keeping focus on the emergency at hand, and which spokespersons have been assigned to address various utility topics or concerns.</p> <p>It is important for all utility personnel to learn what protocols the utility has in place and how each employee fits in.</p>

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Key messages	The things a utility wants customers and all community members to know about the organization above all else.	<p>These are concise statements about what an organization stands for or endeavors to do. Messages are not "spin." They can include information about the organization in general or be specific to a particular project.</p> <p>Everyone in the utility should be familiar with organizational key messages and comfortable with their use. For example: "The XYZ Utility is committed to keeping rates affordable while ensuring that our wastewater system is in top working condition at all times."</p> <p>How utilities keep rates affordable and maintain system are the facts that support this message, but the message itself emphasizes the organizational focus on affordability and reliability. This is a message all utility representatives can present.</p>
Talking points	A bulleted list of key topical information to be covered during a presentation, interview, or even a one-on-one discussion.	<p>Talking points provide the key information a utility needs to communicate about priority topics and help ensure consistency regardless of which utility spokesperson is speaking. Inconsistency can lead to confusion and even distrust – which affects credibility.</p> <p>Consistency sounds straightforward but can be difficult to achieve without proper planning and documentation. Was the wastewater overflow "a lot," "hundreds of gallons," "within regulatory limits," or "limited"? Is the rate increase "5%," "5% more than last year," "5% for everyone," etc.? Talking points provide specificity, clarity, and focus.</p>
Informational materials	The written forms of communication – fact sheets, flyers, newsletters, bill inserts – that convey key utility messages, talking points, and details.	Written informational materials provide consistent, factual, and easy to understand information about an organization. All written materials should be posted on a website so they are easily accessible to everyone. They will include key messages – and sometimes, the talking points – so they provide a quick reference when asked questions by any member of the public.

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"Gobbledygook"	Confusing and meaningless use of language, often involving twisted phrasing or long, convoluted sentences, giving the appearance of an effort to communicate while avoiding genuine communication.	This is what must be avoided. Jargon, technical language, or making communication more complicated than it has to be will jeopardize communication and can lead to confusion or distrust. Simplicity, truthfulness, accuracy, and consistency should be criteria for all public outreach efforts.
Crisis communication plan	Communication and outreach efforts prepared in advance to help any organization representative rapidly respond to an emergency or disaster.	<p>One need only watch the news to see that organizations are predominantly judged on their communication response during emergencies. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico provides strong evidence of the effects of both poor and successful crisis communication.</p> <p>A utility should have a crisis or rapid response plan in place that assigns roles and responsibilities, ensures that spokespersons are identified and prepared, and dictates how to set up field communication areas and news conferences when needed, among other considerations. The time to learn about this plan (or even develop it) is before a crisis occurs.</p> <p>All employees and utility leadership should find out if there is such a plan and how each person fits into its implementation.</p>
Utility outreach representative	An individual responsible for supporting utility efforts to build relationships with customers and the public.	You!

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