Water Utility Communications Can Build Trust During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Key Takeaways

In April 2020, AWWA hosted a webinar on how utilities can be a trusted source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following a communications plan and using a spokesperson, water utilities should focus on simple messages that use basic terminology.

Utilities should express empathy, focus on facts, and be transparent to build and reinforce public trust during a crisis.

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On April 3, 2020, AWWA hosted a webinar titled "Be a Trusted Source: How to Handle Communication Challenges During COVID-19." The webinar was attended by nearly 2,000 people and included presentations on risk communication and messaging, as well as discussions on spokesperson selection, social media, employee privacy and safety, financial impacts, water safety, and workforce issues. Panelists from both Louisville Water Company (Kentucky) and Fort Worth Water Department (Texas) presented case studies to help illustrate the concepts and ideas discussed.

The following is based on the webinar presentation and the subsequent question-and-answer session. Panelists included Melissa Elliott, director of strategic communication services, Raftelis (Denver, Colo.), and AWWA president-elect; Samantha Villegas (Charlotte, N.C.), senior consultant, Raftelis; Kelley Dearing Smith, vice president, communications and marketing, Louisville Water Company; and Mary Gugliuzza, media relations and communications coordinator, Fort Worth Water Department. The moderator was Karen Snyder, Katz & Associates (San Diego, Calif.).

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Risk Communication and Messaging

The current public health emergency is different from anything the world has seen in recent human history. Because the public is paying more attention to authoritative sources during a crisis, effective communication is even more important than during "normal" life. Utilities have several tools available to craft their messaging and tailor it appropriately, both for internal and external audiences.

Communication Tips and Tools

Honest, frequent, clear, and concise communication is essential in times of crisis. Also important is demonstrating compassion, because "no one will care what you know until they know that you care," Villegas said.

To craft a caring message, one helpful tool is the CAP rule (Figure 1), which can assist utilities by focusing on three main elements of communication:

- A caring message—demonstrate empathy and shared concern (e.g., I understand your concern; I'm concerned about this, too).
- An action message—explain what actions have been or will be taken to address the problem (e.g., tap water is safe; disinfection kills viruses, including the coronavirus).
- A perspective message—put the issue into context (e.g., the United States has some of the highest standards for tap water in the world, and we consistently meet those standards).

Even when a message shows caring, in times of stress, people are less able to absorb

The CAP Rule for Compassionate Messaging

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

Action Message: State actions you have taken, are taking, 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.

Courtesy of the Center for Risk Communication; adapted with permission

Figure 1

complicated messages, so it's important to use concise and simple language. To achieve this, follow the 27-9-3 rule (Figure 2): use no more than 27 words that take 9 seconds to say with 3 pieces of information. This messaging format is particularly good for communicating face to face, on the phone, by social media, or on camera. Additional information can be placed on the utility's website for those who want a longer read.

Internal Communications

During a crisis, communication efforts should build trust from the inside out, Dearing Smith said. Start with employee communication and then expand that to communicate externally.

Depending on the utility's employee structure, any employee could be a point of contact for customers and the community, so sharing information with the entire team helps ensure consistent messaging. Louisville Water relied on its crisis team and existing communications plan, which was tailored to responding to the rapid coronavirus outbreak. For smaller utilities that may not have a communications team or robust response plans, communications planning can be arranged using a simple "key message" template (Figure 3).

Message mapping is another useful tool—guidance and templates for this are available from the Center for Risk Communication.

At Louisville Water, internal communications consist of a crisis team meeting, officers' team meeting, and messages to staff—each of which take place daily. The crisis team meeting related to COVID-19 response is led by the chief executive officer (CEO)/president and includes 25 people who meet for 30 minutes each morning to discuss safety and the local and state situation. For these types of meetings, it's important to include the utility's auditor, or in lieu of that, someone can be assigned to take notes so the utility's efforts are documented. The officers' meeting is a chance for utility leaders to discuss big-picture concerns, human resources (HR) and information technology needs, revenue, employee morale, and industry conversations. The daily email to staff
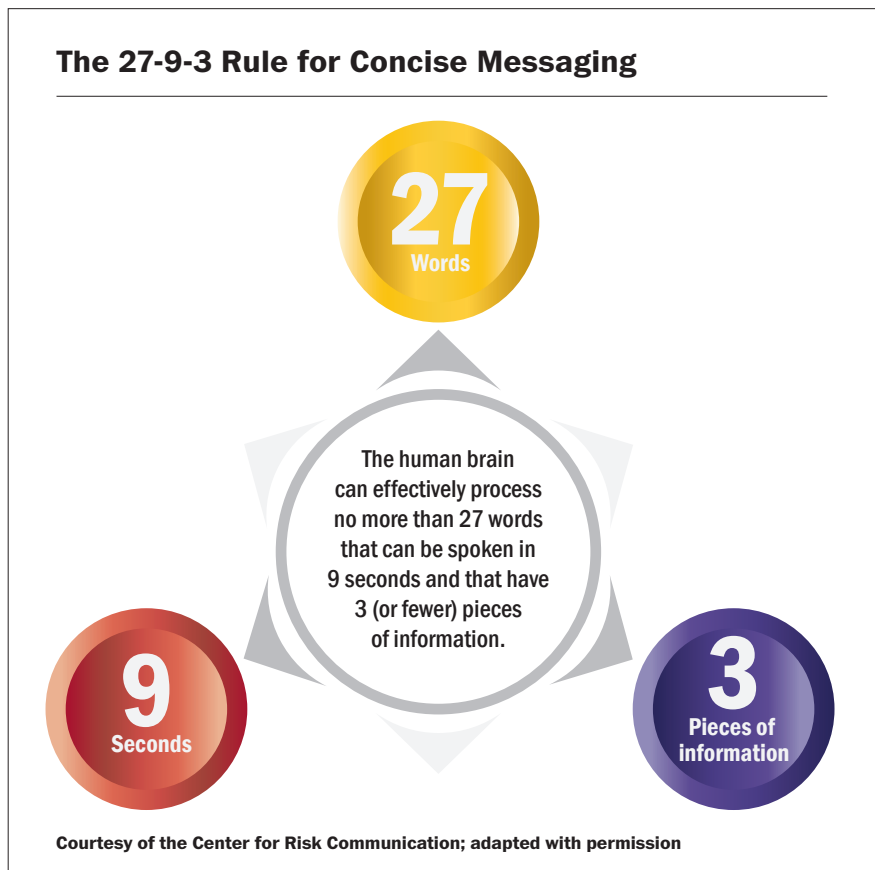
The 27-9-3 Rule for Concise Messaging

27 Words

The human brain can effectively process no more than 27 words that can be spoken in 9 seconds and that have 3 (or fewer) pieces of information.

9 Seconds

3 Pieces of information

Courtesy of the Center for Risk Communication; adapted with permission

Figure 2

is brief—two or three sentences, following the CAP rule—to provide important information and keep everyone connected. Additionally, a leadership video from the CEO/president, produced using a cell phone, goes out about once a week via the utility's intranet site or YouTube channel as another way to keep employees and leaders connected.

External Communications

The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to raise public awareness of the critical service that water utilities provide every day. Talking to customers about the safety of tap water offers positive news amid a lot of negativity, and it also offers reassurance to the public. The key to good crisis communication is to be clear, consistent, and concise. Messaging can be crafted using the CAP principle and 27-9-3 rule. Once the utility's message is developed, information should be shared through multiple channels, depending on the community's preference, including newspapers, local access television, radio, social media, utility and partner websites, and/or direct mail.
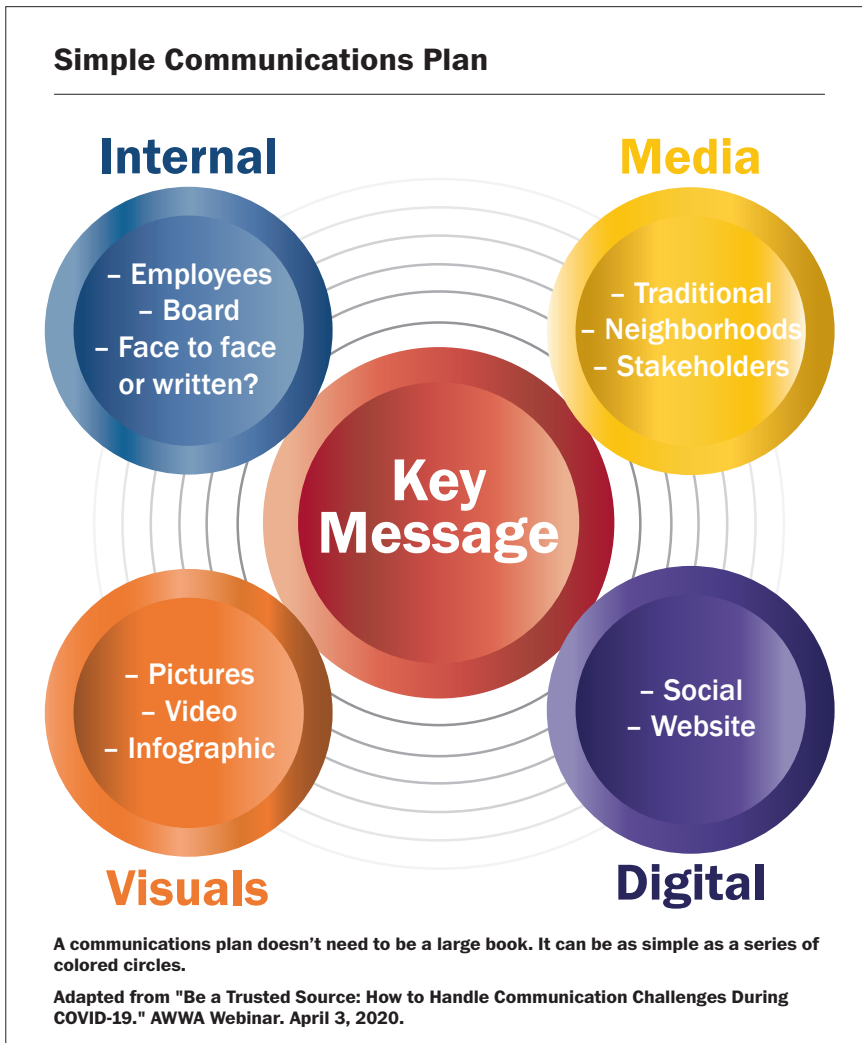
Simple Communications Plan

Internal
– Employees
– Board
– Face to face or written?

Media
– Traditional
– Neighborhoods
– Stakeholders

Key Message

Visuals
– Pictures
– Video
– Infographic

Digital
– Social
– Website

A communications plan doesn't need to be a large book. It can be as simple as a series of colored circles.

Adapted from "Be a Trusted Source: How to Handle Communication Challenges During COVID-19." AWWA Webinar. April 3, 2020.

Figure 3

examples), but before organizing a virtual meeting, leaders should agree on all communication goals and clarity of purpose. For example, is the meeting for information only, or is public input being sought for a decision? For in-person and virtual events, enlisting a professional moderator or facilitator can help keep the conversation productive and minimize disruptive or aggressive attendee behavior.

Spokespersons
While many employees may have points of contact with external stakeholders, it's a good idea to assign a spokesperson for the utility. This person could be part of the communications team if the utility has one, or it could be the CEO, the general manager, or another leader. Regardless, the spokesperson must be a good public speaker and someone who is credible, affable, and trustworthy. It helps if the spokesperson can convey information calmly and communicate clearly.

Providing the spokesperson with training on presentations and media interviews can increase the speaker's comfort level. The 27-9-3 rule can be used to compose messaging that audiences will understand and retain. Any messaging should use simple terminology, not industry-specific or technical language. One tool to help determine an appropriate language level is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Clear Communications Index.

Social Media
Social media is an excellent tool during crisis communications that can be used to reach employees and customers alike. However, it is important to consider that successful social media requires using the proper tone, including graphics and video, getting employees involved, and being responsive to engagement.

Besides including relevant information, messaging during a crisis often requires a serious or professional

With information changing rapidly, as has happened during the coronavirus pandemic, transparency and consistency are more essential, so key stakeholders should meet regularly. If applicable, union leaders should be included in update meetings, too.

External communications should be proactive, so think through potential questions and concerns and craft responses that support messaging. The utility's call center is a good place to start. Public meetings are usually effective at engaging a community and disseminating important information; however, these need to be held via web conference during times of social distancing. There are many platforms that can be used for this type of virtual meeting (see the sidebar on page 29 for

tone, but it's acceptable to post lighthearted messages when they can inspire hope and positivity. The use of graphics and videos draws attention and boosts engagement. Utilities can use content they already have on hand or have employees send in photos and videos from their daily work to post to their social media accounts. In the current environment, filming new videos should be avoided unless they demonstrate employee safety and good social distancing practices.

Monitoring a utility's social media accounts is always important, especially during a crisis. Someone on staff should be responsible for responding to online questions and comments so customers and the broader community feel heard and community issues can be recognized.

For Louisville Water and Fort Worth Water Department, engagement is up as a result of the crisis because customers are actively seeking information. One post on Louisville Water's social media about halting shutoffs reached approximately 250,000 people and was shared more than 3,000 times. Fort Worth Water Department's average engagement was up 541% in March across all platforms, and almost half a million people saw the utility's Facebook content in March on both its English- and Spanish-language pages.

In cases where a utility shares broader city platforms for social media, it could be helpful to work with the city communications team to promote water utility activities, for example, showcasing how utility operations protect public health. One example from the city of Denton, Texas, is a YouTube video showing how the city works for citizens through water and wastewater, police, fire, electric, and solid waste services. Another option to help differentiate water content across a shared platform is to create a hashtag that is consistently used for all water utility posts.

Employee Privacy and Safety

Water utilities have a responsibility to protect their employees, and this includes providing transparent communication when employees are at risk. In the current pandemic, communication should include utility guidelines related to an employee who tests positive for COVID-19, an employee who feels ill with flu-like symptoms, an employee who is asymptomatic but has had direct or close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19, and an employee who has had direct or close contact with someone who had direct contact with someone who tested positive. The actions required on the part of the employee and the employer may vary in each scenario, and steps may be considered for communicating about each of them accordingly.

When preparing to communicate with staff about these sensitive topics, it's important to consult with the utility's HR and legal teams and to ensure that employees feel supported. Any communication activities must maintain employees' health data privacy as well.

If an employee tests positive for the virus, the employer should communicate with staff that a colleague tested positive and—depending on HR and legal guidelines—specify which department and locations were affected. Cleaning staff should be directed to properly disinfect all affected areas, and utility staff should be told what actions are being taken to ensure their safety in the workplace. To minimize the time it takes to notify staff of an employee testing positive for COVID-19, template language can be prepared ahead of time for quick use.

In the tragic event that an employee passes away from an illness related to COVID-19 or under other tragic circumstances, a utility's leader should share the news with staff. Delivering this kind of news face-to-face to everyone at once is best; if not in person, video conference is a good alternative. If the employee's family allows it, the utility can notify external stakeholders after employees have been notified as well.

For external communications about employee health, it can be helpful to consult guidance from state regulatory agencies on required actions. Messaging should focus on employee safety and privacy, the continued safety of tap water, and actions the utility is taking to protect employees and system operations, such as cleaning protocols or alternate work or housing arrangements.

Workforce

Many sectors, including the water sector, have implemented alternate work arrangements to help ensure the

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ONLINE MEETING TOOLS

Given "safer at home" requirements throughout North America, online meeting tools are being improved and gaining in popularity. There are many platforms that can accommodate online discussions, presentations, comments, and question-and-answer sessions, such as the following:
- ClickMeeting: https://clickmeeting.com
- GoToMeeting: www.gotomeeting.com
- Microsoft Teams: www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software
- Skype: www.skype.com/en
- Tele-Town Hall: https://teletownhall.com
- WebEx: www.webex.com
- Zoom: https://zoom.us

safety of staff and the community. In the case of water utilities, some staff can work remotely, and other arrangements can be made to help protect those who must be at the utility or in the community for work. Operations staff may need special arrangements, including isolating critical members or crews, even sheltering onsite at the plant in extreme cases, as was done at California's Carlsbad Desalination Plant.

If employees are working from home, it's advisable to be transparent with the community about it. Share what the utility is doing to protect employees and the community by allowing employees to work from home where feasible. In the case of Louisville Water, the message to the community has been that the utility is an essential employer, but that doesn't mean that all employees need to do their essential job functions in a traditional work setting. Beyond allowing work from home, utilities should also tell their communities how they're keeping employees who must report to work safe and healthy.

> **Besides including relevant information, messaging during a crisis often requires a serious or professional tone, but it's appropriate to post lighthearted messages when they can inspire hope and positivity.**

Financial Impacts

According to a new analysis prepared by Raftelis for AWWA and the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, it's estimated that drinking water utilities in the United States will see revenues from customer payments drop by nearly $14 billion. In responding to financial hardship, many utilities have suspended water shutoffs during the crisis. It's also important to consider that many customers may be unemployed as a result of the pandemic and tailor messaging to be sensitive to this. The key is to get in front of the situation as much as possible and to proactively reach out to consumers to set up payment plans while being as understanding as possible.

For example, Fort Worth Water Department is letting customers know when they are past due on bills but has softened the tone and changed the message to encourage customers to pay what they can. Louisville Water launched a campaign to "pay what you can" in mid-April and then worked on a larger strategy for messaging, bill assistance, and community partnerships to help customers who fall behind on payments as a result of the pandemic.

Water utilities still have financial responsibilities, too, and some may have planned for rate increases before the pandemic started. In the case that the increases can't be delayed, methods for communicating should be varied and include online tools, phone calls, and e-mail messages. Not all customers will have access to online tools, and lower-income populations will be affected more dramatically.

Water Safety

As with communicating about finances during a crisis, other topics also may need to be shared with the utility's community. For example, if a treatment process is changing or a contaminant is identified, the utility needs to share this information with the community in context. Important regular communications should also continue to go out as planned.

Messaging about treatment changes or other safety concerns should be transparent, accurate, appropriate, and timely and should be shared in simple language that's easily understood. It should incorporate any language required by the applicable regulatory agency and be sensitive to the crisis. For example, the communication may start off by acknowledging that people are at home but that the water utility is continuing its normal operations to provide safe water, and then go on to explain any operational changes that have or may become necessary.

As another example, customers may have questions about the effectiveness of a treatment technology related to a potable reuse project. The messaging that has been used for these projects, focusing on the efficacy of science and technology, is especially relevant to COVID-19 discussions. In the case of a contamination issue, context is important. For example, in discussing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances contamination, the utility can describe what actions have been taken over specific time periods to address the issue, reinforcing that water quality is a priority.

Regularly scheduled communications such as annual water quality reports should go out by mail and online as planned to help maintain consistency and build trust with customers. Staying on track with regular communications reinforces the utility as a trusted resource. Questions related to water quality and COVID-19 should be expected, and customer service and field crews should be given up-to-date information that can be shared publicly. For any online COVID-19 messaging, link directly to the utility's Consumer Confidence Report, reinforcing the emphasis on water quality and showing where customers can go to find more information or speak with someone if they have questions.

Building Trust

Beyond consistently providing safe and reliable service, water utilities can build and reinforce public trust through their communications efforts. During times of uncertainty, utilities should carefully craft all messages (for both internal and external audiences), convey empathy, and share facts. Water treatment in North America is extremely reliable, and water professionals are dedicated to protecting public health. Sharing these facts consistently and broadly bolsters communities' confidence in their utilities and reinforces system reliability, which in times like these can help reassure a stressed and anxious public. 💧

Acknowledgment

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AWWA Resources

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) [resource page]. www.awwa.org/Resources-Tools/Resource-Topics/Coronavirus
- Trending in an Instant. AWWA. 2019. www.awwa.org/Policy-Advocacy/Communications-Outreach [AWWA membership login required].
- Reduction in U.S. Water Utility Revenue May Result in $32.7 Billion Economic Hit [news release]. April 15, 2020. AWWA, Denver. www.awwa.org/AWWA-Articles/reduction-in-us-water-utility-revenue-may-result-in-327-billion-economic-hit

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