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Public Affairs as a Strategic Management Function

"IT COSTS TOO MUCH." ... "WE DON'T HAVE TIME." ... "WE NEED TO CONCENTRATE ON THE PROJECT AT HAND." TODAY SOME WATER UTILITY PROFESSIONALS STILL USE SUCH STATEMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE IDEA OF MAKING PUBLIC OUTREACH AN INTEGRAL PART OF UTILITY MANAGEMENT.

It's an unfortunate attitude, because experience clearly demonstrates the value of devoting public outreach resources on major issues and projects early on instead of after the fact.

Those who have been part of the water profession for any substantial period can quickly point to experiences of failed or delayed rate increases, halted construction projects, quashed management proposals, and general misunderstandings among utility stakeholders because the utility did not pro-

public outreach as an equal component of strategic planning and day-to-day operations, vital, successful public information initiatives are commonplace. Such successful programs in turn mean increased community support for projects and activities, public support from elected officials, increased community recognition of the value of water and its role in a healthy, vibrant society, and fewer voiced concerns about potentially controversial issues.

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vide timely, accurate, and understandable information. These challenges become more frequent and magnified as the water industry faces costly infrastructure improvements, competition with other utilities for resources, double-digit rate increases, a national focus on security, and ongoing water quality concerns.

Fortunately, there are also numerous examples of how public outreach programs have played a pivotal role in utility management. Siting important facilities, gaining acceptance for a new utility program, and reducing community concerns about issues are just a few examples of success.

Management support and commitment are critical to a public outreach program's viability and success. In utilities in which management views

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AWWA AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

AWWA has taken a lead role in emphasizing the importance of public outreach to the strategic planning and day-to-day activities of water utilities. During the mid-1980s, AWWA created the Public Affairs Council (PAC) as one of only seven council-level volunteer units within the organization. The PAC plans and coordinates public information and outreach programs and assists other councils with incorporating community perspectives and public outreach strategies into their work programs and products.



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“audiences”), what those audiences will want to know, the types of outreach activities that are most likely to engage each audience, when such activities will be implemented, and how contact with the audiences will be maintained.

Bring public outreach professionals to the table. After-the-fact outreach is far too common, and it

As one means of integrating public outreach into other functional areas of the water profession, AWWA established liaisons between the PAC and other volunteer units, including AWWA’s Management Division, Water Utility Council, Technical & Educational Council, Manufacturers/Associates Council, and Water Quality & Technology Division among others.

The concept is working. At the same time as AWWA’s Management Division provides tools and guidance to assist managers in achieving their goals and objectives, two of the eight current trustee members bring specific expertise in public outreach and community relations, playing a vital role in shaping the industry’s approach to utility management.

For the past three years, the Management Division and PAC have jointly sponsored a Water Utility Leadership Forum at AWWA’s

Annual Conference and Exposition (ACE) to highlight the interconnection and synergy of management and public outreach in approaching the emerging issues facing the water utility profession.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR UTILITY MANAGEMENT

Within the guidance given by AWWA and its volunteer units, several common threads regarding how organizations can begin to incorporate public outreach as an integral management function have emerged.

Have a plan. Utilities are comfortable with capital plans to outline construction and infrastructure needs. They are also comfortable with an annual budget to determine what can and cannot be funded in the coming year. It’s important that utilities also have a strategic communication plan that clearly identifies with whom the utilities intend to communicate (their

is always less efficient and more expensive than strategic communication planning. Just as preventive infrastructure maintenance is preferable to emergency fixes, the efficacy of proactive education and outreach surpasses that of crisis communications. As a utility management team considers activities and challenges in terms of operations, rate, and capital or construction effects, simultaneous evaluation of community and stakeholder effects and the corresponding outreach should occur.

Incorporate public outreach funding into all major project budgets. Nearly any capital effort that a utility undertakes will affect some stakeholder group. Tearing up streets, creating late-night noise, obstructing traffic, covering neighborhoods with dust, and potentially increasing overall rates are but a few of the effects of capital improvements. Strategic community outreach can help put stakeholders at

ease and reduce negative reaction, and therefore should be incorporated into all capital budgets.

In addition, utilities should plan for consistent, multifaceted, and sus-

tained outreach; train utility leadership to play a successful role in outreach; and evaluate efforts to continually learn from and improve public outreach efforts.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE

A host of resources are available to utility managers who want to incorporate such steps and learn about other options and opportunities.

AWWA's Management Division. As part of its ongoing mission, the Management Division seeks to identify existing and emerging issues and develop educational forums around those topics, including public outreach.

AWWA's Public Affairs Council. The PAC is actively developing educational offerings, informational materials, and strategic guidance for association members. In addition, the PAC works closely with AWWA's public outreach consultant to obtain visibility for AWWA's emerging issues.

AWWA's Public Affairs staff. In meeting its commitment to serve as a vital resource to its members, the water profession, and the public and to serve as the voice of the drinking water community, AWWA and its public affairs staff work to build bridges with regulators, legislators, special interest groups, and the general public. A full-time public affairs staff and a host of guidance and educational materials provide valuable resources on current approaches to utility challenges and public outreach opportunities. They provide public education and outreach plans and materials, many gleaned from the experience and successes of member utilities, including winners of AWWA's annual Public Communications Award.

More information on all of these groups and their offerings can be found at www.awwa.org. In addition, the AWWA Research Foundation (AWWARF) also provides helpful resources. A member-supported, international, nonprofit organization that sponsors a variety of research pertinent to the water profession, AWWARF has funded a

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MEETING STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

People expect to participate in decisions that affect their future, and these include most of those that surround water utility activities. People want to know what is occurring in their neighborhoods and understand why, how, and when. Informing the public and engaging them in programs and projects develops understanding between a utility and its stakeholders. Public outreach and involvement can create long-term support for an organization

and its goals. Linking public outreach with strategic planning is an important component of successful utility management.

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For a complete listing of the members of the AWWA Management Division and PAC, as well as the other councils and divisions referred to in this article, please see www.awwa.org/sections/committeel.

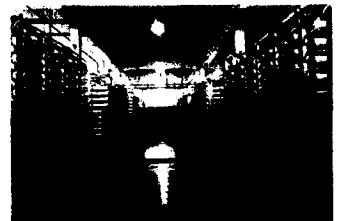
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