



WaterPIO
ALWAYS ON CALL

**Good News or Bad News:
How to Effectively Communicate with the
Press & the Public**

Mike McGill, President

Background

- **Producer, **
- **Planning Editor, , Washington, DC**
- **12+ Years as Media Relations Manager, Director**
- **3+ Years: Public Affairs  Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission**
- **Director, Customer Relations & Communications  LOUDOUN WATER**
- **4+ Years: Chief Communications Officer  Cape Fear Public Utility Authority
Stewardship. Sustainability. Service.**
- **Founded  WaterPIO
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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**
- **Water operations need to meet these expectations for a variety of reasons. But you can do it.**

The Instant Information Age

- **Limited outreach budgets, time to focus on communications**
- **With minor commitment of resources, you can add outreach**
- **For everyone's benefit. You and your customers.**
- **Mindful of apprehension. Many of you have been burned before.**
- **Common sense. Use tried-and-true methods, messages.**
- **Achieve short-term goals (customer communication)**
- **Achieve long-term goals (relationship-build with customers)**

Today's Communications Landscape

- **Mass media influence/operations shrinking BUT...**
 - **STILL #1** for mass messaging to public/customers
 - **Expectations to communicate w/media, public remain high**
- **Impact of Web, Social Media**
 - **Pressure to move needle (ratings, page views). Need, want content.**
 - **Less time to go in-depth. Constant need to hold attention.**
 - **Direct route to public**
 - **Rapid response to misinformation**

“More with Less”

- **Customers, reporters are just like you. Doing “more with less.”**
 - **Communicate with this in mind**
 - **BE PROACTIVE. Reach out, communicate before you must do it.**
 - **Put yourself in their shoes. If there’s a gap, they will fill it some way.**
 - **Media outreach: Make it easier on them. Giftwrap stories.**
 - **Results in fewer errors, lower confusion**
 - **Burned in past? Move past it. People have shorter memories today.**

Social Media

- **Anyone can gain attention for problems with your utility. FAST.**
 - **Social media can create major problems for any water operation**
 - **Can stir up trouble in one neighborhood, then entire service area**
 - **Can lead to local, national news. Mt. Pleasant, SC. Plano, TX.**
 - **Doesn't matter if stories are true. Anger treated with more respect.**
 - **Easy for the press to jump on with little time, cost commitment**
 - **How do you prepare? Use regular communications, outreach.**
 - **Build relationships with posters in service area. It pays off.**

Impact of Proactive Communications

- **If you proactively talk to your customers on a consistent basis, it builds trust.**
- **That trust is vital for rate increases, construction projects, and water quality crises**
- **Fresh proof communication strengthens ratepayer relationships:
J.D. Power 2017 Water Utility Survey**



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J.D. Power 2017 Water Utility Survey
 - Customer satisfaction scores were **20% higher** when they recalled receiving one proactive utility communication in last 3 months
 - Scores were **15% higher** when customers recalled seeing news coverage
 - Frequent communication equals best results: Customers who recall receiving **6-plus communications** gave **30% higher scores**.



That's great. But how?

➤ **Tried-and-true approach**

- Requires preparation, commitment. **STAY** proactive.
- No immediate results? Work **NOT** wasted. Long-term benefits.
- Variety of tools can be used

➤ **Where to start?**

- What are the goals? Don't overthink, use gut. (Customers do.)
- Honest assessments. Promote strengths. Attack weaknesses.
- Develop messages w/customers in mind. Use tools for support. (South Carolina rate dashboard. Prices, economic data.)

That's great. But how?

➤ **Information ideas**

- Dozens of ideas that require modest preparation
- Just about every aspect of your work can become content
- You can also push out calls for help. Example: Diabetic needles.

➤ **Boost your outreach. Overcome scar tissue. It will pay off.**

- Know you often only get attention for a bad bill or break
- Move forward. You can actually address the past at the same time.
- Be transparent. You boost your availability, openness.
The door does become a revolving one.

That's great. But how?

➤ **How to get the messages out, build media relationships**

- **Standard methods:**
 - Press releases, Web content, board meetings.
 - Bill messages/inserts, basic use of social media (announcement)
- **Intermediate methods:**
 - Big projects or plans? Use mass media, social media. Briefings work.
 - Expanded use of social media (engagement)
 - Stakeholder outreach, presentations
- **Advanced methods:**
 - Write an op-ed, take reporter “behind-the-curtain”
 - Community outreach, presentations

Other Tools to Use

- **Communications Materials, Web & Social Media Content:**
 - **Write, produce print & online materials that effectively communicate key messages:**
 - Customer education brochures, bill inserts, flyers
 - CCRs and Annual Reports
 - Web updates. Consistent Facebook, Twitter, Instagram use.
 - Customer/project newsletters



Messages that Work

- **Push your strengths. You are the BACKBONE of the community.**
 - **Not-for-profit. Revenue-neutral. \$\$\$ in goes back out in services.**
 - **“Five Pillars” that ensure quality of life:**
 - **Sanitation. Disease, fire and enviro protection. Economic development.**
 - **24/7 nature of services. Highlight the good work of staff.**
 - **Financial strength. Inform about bond ratings, awards.**
 - **Internal efforts that show money is being spent wisely, well**
 - **Positive cause-and-effects**
 - **Live right along with you in your community**

Messages that Work

➤ **INFRASTRUCTURE MESSAGES**

- **Water/sewer services play important societal role**
 - **Clean, safe drinking water: Your PRODUCT is essential for life.**
 - **Public health, fire protection. Enviro protection, econ backbone.**
 - **Failures? Can greatly affect quality of life.**

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- **Water/sewer services play important societal role**
 - Clean, safe drinking water: Your **PRODUCT** is essential for life.
 - Public health, fire protection. Enviro protection, econ backbone.
 - Failures? Can greatly affect quality of life.
- **We need to address our aging infrastructure**
 - Nationwide AND local problem. Out of sight, out of mind.
 - Parents, grandparents built finest systems in world BUT...
 - Getting old and need to be replaced, not just repaired. Now.
 - Shouldn't pass this off to future generations

Messages that Work

- **BILL COMPLAINTS/RATE INCREASES**
 - **We're dealing with same financial issues you are**
 - Higher costs for everyday items
 - Higher health care, benefit costs
 - Higher costs for utility-specific items (chemicals, equipment)

Messages that Work

- **BILL COMPLAINTS/RATE INCREASES**
 - **We're dealing with same financial issues you are**
 - Higher costs for everyday items
 - Higher health care, benefit costs
 - Higher costs for utility-specific items (chemicals, equipment)
 - **No matter what the ask is for, water is still a tremendous value**
 - Public health, fire protection. Enviro protection, economic backbone.
 - Tested thousands of times to ensure highest quality
 - Clean water compared to gas, milk, bottled water, Starbucks
 - Tenths of a cent/gallon AND home delivered



Public water is a great deal!

The Cost of Your Water

(Price PER Gallon)



\$ 3.00



\$4.00



\$13.00



\$32.00



.5 CENTS



***\$1 of drinking water fills 2,000+ BOTTLES of water.
Savings: \$2,400 (@1.25 per 16 oz.)***





SC Water and Wastewater Rates Dashboard

Rates as of October 2015
Dashboard updated: May 6, 2016



Columbia

Rates Comparison
Characteristics
Links
Edit Data or Add Utility

Select residential bill and monthly consumption amount

Water Bill
 Sewer Bill
 Water + Sewer Bill

6,000 gallons
 802 cubic feet

Monthly Water & Sewer Bill: \$52.61

Select comparison group: All Utilities

Comparing to **all utilities in survey**

157 rate structures compared

Effects of raising rates by: 0%

Bill Comparison

Water & Sewer Bill at 6,000 gallons
Median: \$66.75

Min \$26.97 Max \$129.85

Cost Recovery

Operating Ratio incl. Depreciat. 2015

Data Not Available

Median Affordability

Annual Water & Sewer Bills as % MHI

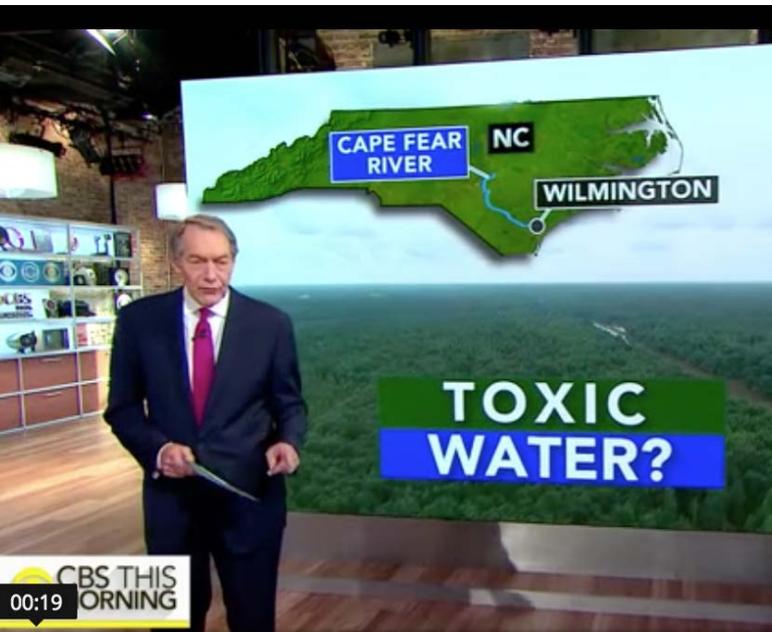
Revenue Stability

Base Charge % of Bill

Median: 44%



What Happens When You Don't Communicate



NEW TEFLON TOXIN FOUND IN NORTH CAROLINA DRINKING WATER



Sharon Lerner
June 17 2017, 8:16 a.m.



Chemical Contaminant Crisis: National

- **”Emerging Contaminants”**: Chemicals discharged into water, airborne into wells
 - **Present the greatest threat to public confidence in drinking water**
 - Hundreds, if not thousands, of unregulated contaminants are in our source waters
 - Allowed to be discharged into our waterways by “honor-based” permitting processes
 - Almost all lack scientific data on impacts to public health
 - Regulatory processes, EPA in particular, are slow. UCMRs cover 30 at a time.
 - Meanwhile, water testing technology has improved. Finding at parts per trillion levels.
 - Concerned academics, activists are testing the source waters. Making headlines.
 - Even utilities that cooperate can find themselves on the defensive

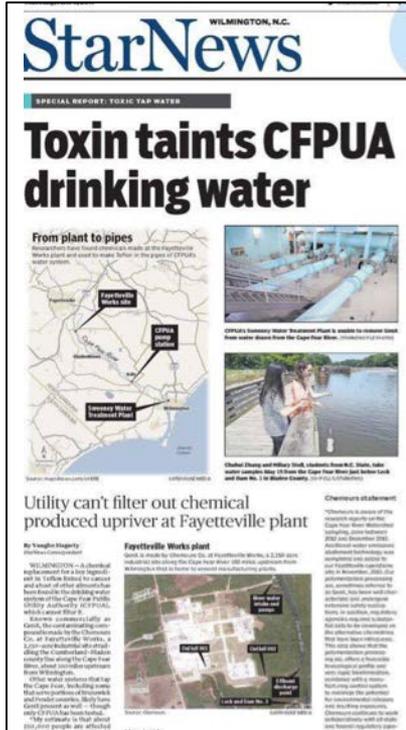
Chemical Contaminant Crisis: Cape Fear

- Chemical contaminant study released in 2016. NC State, with Water Utility help:
 - **Up front: NO mistakes made by utility water quality staff. NONE.**
 - Found several PFASs in Cape Fear River below Chemours plant (Dow Chemical)
 - Drinking water levels well above EPA “lifetime health advisory”
 - Sent to interested parties. No attention, one study. Months later, sent to local paper.

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 - **One EC caught their eye: GenX. “Safer” C8, known carcinogen. \$671 Million in WVA.**
 - Utility contacted, barely cooperated. No internal/external staff prep by utility.
 - Why? Utility felt little risk. “It’s not our fault. Chemours is the villain.”
 - Utility given more notice. No Customer Services or Communications prep.
 - June 8, 2017: Story is a BOMBSHELL

Chemical Contaminant Crisis: Cape Fear



The Aftermath:

- Public reaction swift, angry. And aimed squarely at utility.
- “You KNEW and you didn’t tell us. Why didn’t YOU tell us?”
- Customer Service not given info. Had to ask customers for emails. Media calls went unreturned. First full response took 3 days.
- Location. Location. Location. Four miles away vs. 100 miles away.

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- Location. Location. Location. Four miles away vs. 100 miles away.
- Chemours admits to original GenX discharge since 1980
- Conversation shifts: Blame on Chemours, regulatory processes
- Utility’s staff continues proper actions, regains some footing
- However, StarNews states trust in utility “permanently shaken”

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- **Start with regular communications about your services. Boosts public trust.**
- **Use mass media & social media. Build relationships with both. Will pay off.**
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- **Use mass media & social media. Build relationships with both. Will pay off.**
- **When tough moments come, rely on your plans. Quickly inform your customers.**
- **TRANSPARENCY. Be available. Engage everywhere, even on social media.**
- **Rely on messages that work. Build relationships now. Use them later.**
- **Stay out front. Stay the primary source for information.**



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