Communicating PFAS Discoveries to the Public

Mike McGill, President
My ONE Thing...

Become & STAY
THE GO-TO source
for public information
Customers receive the news they want WITHOUT needing to ask for it

They expect timely information, especially about services they pay for and rely on.

Water utilities must meet these expectations. Especially with water quality concerns.
• Old arrogance. “We know water. The public won’t understand.”
• Old scar tissue: “The media only cares about controversy.”
• Old mindset: “Out of sight, out of mind? Fine by me.”
Old Days, Old Ways are OVER

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Thanks to social media, those days are OVER.

• Stick with OLD mindset? Russian Roulette with reputation.
• Not talking days or weeks of damage. Talking YEARS.
• Regular outreach, information sets the table for success
• Proactive, consistent communications builds trust. VITAL when speaking to water quality, infrastructure upgrades.
PFAS Prep: Proactive COMMS

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- 15 to 30% higher scores when customers remembered proactive communications. More COMMS? Better results.
PFAS Prep: Proactive COMMS

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• PROOF: J.D. Power Water Customer Surveys. 40,000 people.

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• Media impact? WQA: In 2015, 27% of customers said they learned about water issues from news media. 2017? 43%.
Emerging Contaminants

- So what are PFAS & ECs? Why are we here?
- ECs = Chemicals detected/being detected in trace amounts largely due to advances in water testing
- Risks to health & environment not yet understood
- Little - if any - health/medical data on almost all of them
- EPA "conservative" estimate: Thousands in nation’s source waters
PFAS

• PFAS = Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances

• Man-made chemicals produced since 1940s
  • Think Teflon & Gore-Tex. Anything water/stain-resistant.
  • Fire-fighting foam. Discoveries near airbases, airports.
  • Oral-B Glide dental floss. Chocolate cake mix.
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- PFOA & PFOS: 2 PFAS phased out due to associations with adverse health risks. Cancer, thyroid, pregnancy impacts.
PFAS Impact

• 1 of 2 GREATEST THREATS TO PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SERVICES
PFAS Impact

• **1 of 2 GREATEST THREATS TO PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SERVICES**
• **Why?** Flint. Shook public confidence across the country.
• Shorthand for almost ANY water quality issue
• Like Flint, PFAS/EC news could create doubt anywhere
• **1000s of chemicals are in our nation’s water supplies**
• Water testing tech has improved. Finding at PPT levels.
• Academics, activists testing waters. **Making headlines.** FUNDING CYCLE.
• Utilities caught off-guard: Reputations wiped out in days for years.
• Immediate demands for advanced treatment
PFAS Impact: North Carolina

- **2017 Discovery of PFAS:**
  - Several PFASs in Cape Fear River. From Chemours plant.
  - Drinking water levels well above EPA’s “lifetime health advisory” of 70 ppt
  - One PFAS grabbed attention: GenX. ”Safer C8.” Suspected carcinogen led to $671 million WVA settlement (Movie: “Dark Waters” comes out November 22)
  - Utility did NOT cooperate. No internal/external COMMS.
  - June 2017: Story hits. Local & national bombshell.
Wilmington NC = Flint MI
GEN X
PFAS Impact: North Carolina

- The Aftermath:
  - Utility reputation severely damaged
  - State GenX level drops from 70,000 ppt to 140 ppt
  - Purple state. Political fight about state remedies.
  - GenX levels dropped, but total PFAS still in 100s ppt.
  - Lawsuits filed. Public, utility switched to PFAS removal.
  - Affected utilities expedited plans for advanced treatment
  - Two utilities: Combined $150 million for construction alone
  - Snap decision to shut down biosolids program. Ripple effect.
EPA’s PFAS “Action Plan”

- Announced V-Day 2019
  - Evaluate need for PFOA and PFOS MCLs
  - Begin steps for “hazardous chemical” designations
  - Complete task of issuing groundwater cleanup recs
  - Did add... More PFAS in next UCMR process. (Details TBD.)

- Widely panned by almost everyone working in public water
  - Time & energy wasted. Can kicked for years. Political gaps created.
  - Unwillingness to act on PFOA & PFOS despite years of data
  - UCMR process: Date, PFAS to be tested unknown. Years away.
"Action Plan" Problems

• Major problems for public water utilities, biosolids efforts
  
  *Headlines require speed on standards, leading to treatment mandates*
  
  • States developing own standards to fill gap created
    • Checkerboard numbers on accelerated, politically influenced schedules
  
  • Testing drawbacks: Data provided without context, support.
  
  • Customer confusion & anger guaranteed
  
  • New standards create unfunded mandates for advanced treatment
  
  • If PFAS is CERCLA’d without water/wastewater exemptions = Disaster
    • Lawyers ready to sue utilities. Low-hanging fruit.
    • Can’t fight long. Smaller legal teams. EASY settlement $$$$.
Frustrated by EPA, states blaze ahead on PFAS

NJ implements nation’s toughest PFAS standard

Michigan moves forward on drinking water standards for PFAS

Vermont Legislature Passes Bill That Would Impose Strict PFAS Limits

N.H. Approves Unprecedented Limits For PFAS In Drinking Water

N.H.’s New PFAS Limits Face Swift Lawsuit From Local Water Handlers, 3M
Assumptions Become Fact

TEFLON TOXIN SAFETY LEVEL SHOULD BE 700 TIMES LOWER THAN CURRENT EPA GUIDELINE

Based on statements made by Dr. Linda Birnbaum, now-former head of NIEHS

• LB - .1 ppt for PFOA should be “safe level” in drinking water
• LB - Based on one cancer study & other contaminant level approaches
• Quickly parroted by activists online. EWG repetition.
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- LB - Based on one cancer study & other contaminant level approaches
- Quickly parroted by activists online. EWG repetition.
- We challenged the statement. Clear it was made w/o talking to water pros.
- .1 ppt = NON-DETECT. Sets up every utility in nation for accusation.
- If .1 is DW standard, then start banning consumer products. NOW.
- Resulted in LB walkback BUT reporter refused to change headline
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PFAS Approach

• Number #1 Rule: Put yourself in your customers’ shoes
• J.D. Power Water Surveys: 1/3 of customers report “water quality issues”
• Biggest mistake: Arrogance. All trust can be wiped out by ONE headline.
• Boost treatment COMMS, social media. Strengthen community ties.
• Create COMMS plan for PFAS & EC discoveries, infrastructure impacts:
  • Be ready whenever a story puts your services in limelight
  • Uses “planned transparency.” Helps you gain trust while exercising control.
  • Contains vetted PFAS, treatment messages for multiple platforms
  • Sets up potential water/wastewater infrastructure needs
• Lead with messages supporting your important, expert role
• “Response based on our knowledge, experience protecting public health”
  • Water is our life. We share concerns about these discoveries.
  • Your water meets/exceeds federal & state standards for safety, quality
  • We’re taking action. We will continue to deliver safe, clean water.

• Helpful messages IF you are actively communicating...
  • Important treatment information always available from us
  • Whenever you are concerned, we’re here. Ask us.
  • Stay informed, but be careful with social media. Come to us.
PFAS Messages

- “Our Duty”
  - Hard-working people dedicated to delivering safe, clean water to you. 24/7/365.
  - Our families drink the same water

- “Working for you”
  - Tracking solutions with regulatory agencies, industry leaders, scientists
  - Reviewing treatment process to ensure right short, long-term solutions

- “Perspective”
  - Explain what EPA & state health advisories mean
  - Advanced testing finding substances at parts per trillion levels
    - One second in 32,000 years
    - The first six inches on a trip to the Sun
    - One drop of food coloring in 14 MILLION gallons of water
Summary

• PFAS & EC Issues are NOT going away
  • Advances in water testing
  • Slow regulatory processes
  • “Discovery Cycle”
  • Political gaps

• Need to prepare NOW:
  • Proactive communications boost public trust
  • Build/strengthen customer relationships, including social media
  • Develop a PFAS & EC COMMS plan NOW. Be ready for news to hit.

• Respect the customer. Planned transparency. Gains control & trust.
• Use “Our Duty,” “Working for You,” & “Perspective” messages
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