

Communications & Water management

How utilities can communicate better

Presented by

Qatium

Communications & water management:

How utilities can communicate better

Executive summary

This paper is a valuable resource for water utilities who want to upgrade their communications practices, so they can nurture better, lasting relationships with their customers.

You'll hear from communications experts in the water industry and beyond who have challenged the status quo of largely impersonal, transactional relationships between utilities and customers, and witnessed the benefits.

They share inspiring stories, value-packed best practices, and insightful recommendations for how you can overcome internal and external challenges and communicate better with your customers both in-person and online.

Learn how to build a "trust bank" with your customers. Explore using humor to humanize water work. Consider leveraging "community nodes" to shift perceptions about controversial changes. And think about how storytelling practices could transform perspectives and rally your customers around the value of water.

Water utilities of all sizes will find ideas in this paper that they can implement now to lessen customer apathy, misunderstandings, and even hostility, and at the same time cultivate more creative, fun, and meaningful communications with customers over the long term.

Expert Contributors



Stephanie Corso

CEO at Rogue Water



Tom Freyberg

*Environmental Journalist & GM of
Atlantean Media*



John Gonzalez

*Communications and Social Media at
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer
District (NEORSO)*



Paul Davison

CEO at Proteus Communications Group

Table of contents

Trust is a long-game: Why utilities need to shift from transactional communications to relationship building, and how to do it 5

by Stephanie Corso

- Why transactional communications no longer work for water utilities 6
- Build a “trust bank” with your customers 7
- Communication is everyone’s responsibility; empower your people to do it well 8

Inspiring water campaigns: Xylem partnership with Manchester City Football club 10

Story is king — harnessing the power of storytelling through content 11

by Tom Freyberg

- The importance of storytelling in the water sector 12
- Content fuels your outreach strategy 13
- Storytelling fundamentals 14
- Content strategy - a three stage process 15

Inspiring water campaigns: Utility creates craft beer made from highly treated reclaimed wastewater 17

How water utilities can build internal and external trust using social media 18

by John Gonzalez

- How to start rebuilding trust using social media: the story behind Northeast Ohio Regional District’s Twitter account 19
- How to build internal trust to have the flexibility to post as you want 20
- How to shape content that humanizes utilities 22
- Impacts beyond social media 24

Inspiring water campaigns: The Drop Store - a market for a world in water crisis 25

How to leverage “community nodes” to improve public perception

26

by Paul Davison

- Identify common values and communicate your project's “why” 27
- What are “community nodes” and how do they support your communications? 28
- Brief community nodes—but don't sell your project 29
- Other best practices for community-node engagement 30

Inspiring water campaigns: Northumbrian Water Group (NWG) hosts Festival billed “Glastonbury of water”

32

Final remarks

33

Final thoughts by Qatium

Trust is a long-game:

Why utilities need to shift from transactional communications to relationship building, and how to do it



Stephanie Corso

CEO at Rogue Water

Trust is a long-game:

Why utilities need to shift from transactional communications to relationship building, and how to do it



Stephanie Corso
CEO at Rogue Water

Why transactional communications no longer work

Historically a silent industry

Historically, water utilities have been a silent industry, doing their work under the radar to deliver water and wastewater services. Communication with customers is largely transactional, revolving around billing cycles, maintenance, and repairs. Often, customers only hear from their water utility when something's wrong, or when the utility needs something from them.

But **the status-quo of transactional communications between utilities and the communities they serve doesn't hold water anymore.** In the information age, misinformation and mis-understandings can run rampant, and communities who've been ignored and underrepresented in decisions affecting their water in the past can emit wounds that are felt nationally — broken trust that utilities across the board must address.

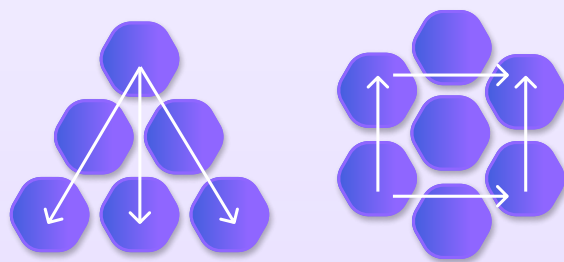
Consider the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, for example. That experience created a wound not just in Flint but in every black community across the country.

If your utility serves populations that identify with the breach of trust Flint residents experienced, it becomes your responsibility to rebuild a trusting relationship with those customers, even if the breach didn't happen in your backyard.

Operating on a trust deficit

But the reality is, most water utilities operate on a deficit of trust with their customers, no matter who those customers are, simply because of the nature of how people relate to the government and what feelings they may already have towards institutions like utilities.

The problem with a trust deficit in the utility-customer relationship is it makes it difficult for utilities and their communities to take action on today's water challenges.



Switching from transactional communications to relationship building

As a water utility, you need support from the people you serve to secure funding, approve operational changes and new infrastructure, and influence sustainable behaviors in the face of environmental and water-related challenges.

Build a “trust bank” with your customers

Think of your communications as a “trust bank”

Think of your communications with your customers as putting deposits into a “trust bank.” In relationships, trust is built from many small, meaningful interactions over time. Your trust-building interactions with your community are like an accumulative safety net for the relationship, because relationships will always have their difficult moments. There will always be times when, inevitably, something doesn’t go 100% right. It’s part of being human. But the more you deposit trust-building interactions into your relationship with customers, the less a withdrawal will impact that relationship when things go a little off-course.

Devote more time to non-transactional communications

In order to be a sustainable, resilient water utility today, utilities need to prioritize and devote more time to non-transactional communications with their customers **over the long term**. You can do this by building awareness about what your organization does, sharing stories of staff and community heroes, and connecting with people in a genuine, empathetic, and honest way, in person and online.

Transparency is a cornerstone of trust-building

Transparency is a cornerstone of trust-building with water utility customers. When you’re open, honest, and clear with your customers about your challenges, operations, services, pricing, and values, you’re transparent about who you are and how you do business.

“

Transparency is also reflected in an organization’s willingness to acknowledge and admit mistakes, and how available it is to respond to customer conversations, questions, and concerns through different online and face-to-face channels.

”

But it takes vulnerability on the part of the water utility to begin to share more information, to be more transparent with your customers, and people are often afraid of what might happen. Will it snowball? Will it give the community an opportunity to criticize you? It’s possible.

But more often you’ll find the more vulnerability and trust you show others, the more you’re giving them permission to do the same with you. Don’t wait to start building that relationship with your customers. Utilities can and should start to build trust, bit-by-bit, now.

Be present at community events

If you’re wondering how or where to start building trust with the people you serve, start by meeting people where they are. Some of the biggest impacts happen face-to-face, so having a presence at community events is a great place to start.

Does your community have a beloved festival? An event that happens every year? Show up for that. Have a presence. Set up a booth, even if it's just a table and a few pieces of swag where people can engage with some members of your team and ask questions. Consider other ways you can get involved and have a presence at community events, like providing a water truck to distribute free tap water for example.

Having a presence is a great first step, and it's something a utility of any size can do and in fact every single utility can do a better job at. You don't need a million dollar communications budget to start building an ongoing relationship with your community.

Build relationships with existing community networks

Reach out to active organizations and community groups who already have a presence in your service area. Ask them about good places and events to connect with customers. When you do this, it's like killing two birds with one stone because you're finding out how to create a presence for your utility and at the same time building beneficial relationships with existing community influencers.

Prioritize in-person communication to augment online efforts

You may be thinking, why would I do in-person outreach when I could reach 100 people on social media through something like a targeted ad. The thing is, if you're starting from scratch, an ad isn't going to have the same personable, humanizing impact as a face-to-face connection with a smaller number of people will.

Once those relationships are built and the groundwork has been laid, you'll see more impact from your work to augment your message with social media channels.

Communication is everyone's responsibility; empower your people to do it well

Empower all your staff to engage

If you want to change your utility's communication paradigm from transactional to relational, it's probably time to challenge and reframe the way employees show up at work and what they view as their responsibility in terms of what they do or do not need to communicate to the public.

Are your staff and field operators avoiding interactions with the community when they're out in the field? That means you have an opportunity to empower them with communications training, so they know what your organization stands for and they feel confident having conversations when they're out in the community. You want your staff to feel prepared if they happen to be wearing a jacket or hat with your logo on it at the grocery store or the local pub, and someone approaches them with a comment or a complaint.

Train all your staff so they feel comfortable speaking with people. Because every single person in your organization has the opportunity and the potential to be an ambassador for the organization, and that face-to-face, neighbor-to-neighbor connection is just another piece of the trust-building puzzle.

Bring operators to community outreach events

Building trust with residents is not just about your communications and outreach teams engaging with the public. If you have a booth or another kind of presence at an event, get your people with boots on the ground to run it.

Having your field operators running your booths at events not only humanizes staff in the eyes of the community, it's also a chance for staff to receive appreciative feedback from community members, so they can see that their work is valued.

“Your operators, utility managers, and experts are veterans with a wealth of knowledge about the job. They're the ones the community sees in the field. So give them the opportunity to engage with the community in a different, often more positive and fun way than they usually do.”

Branding gives your people a strong sense for how to communicate

We don't talk about this enough in the water industry, but your brand is so much more than your logo. **Your brand is the essence of your organization. It's your mission and your values. It's who you are.** If you have a strong brand, it gets people excited and rallies people behind your organization's core message. It gets everyone speaking to the same mission and values. It creates consistency and unity around one single idea, and that's critical to trust-building. You'll gain internal and external advocates because everyone is on the same page. While in-depth branding may be more feasible for larger utilities, smaller utilities can engage with branding at whatever level that's available to them.

Don't let your brand be just a logo or a dull, empty mission statement. Your brand is the heartbeat of your organization, and it will help you on your journey to engage with customers in a genuine, open way as you shift away from transactional communications in favor of relationship and trust building.

Inspiring Water Campaigns

Xylem partnership with Manchester City Football club

About the campaign

Xylem, a leading innovator in water, wastewater, and energy solutions, partners with Manchester City Football Club on water-awareness campaigns and local initiatives that achieve the mission to create a more water-secure world.



Credit: [Xylem website](#)

Why it works

Xylem-ManCity campaigns meet people where they are — watching football. By connecting Xylem's message to millions of football fans, and bringing the soccer players' voices into impactful [short films](#), the next generation of football fans have a chance to be influenced by their heroes to think differently about water.

Story is king -

Harnessing the power of storytelling through content



Tom Freyberg

*Environmental Journalist & GM of
Atlantean Media*

Story is king — harnessing the power of storytelling through content



Tom Freyberg
Environmental Journalist & GM of Atlantean Media

The importance of storytelling in the water sector

Communicating the real value of water

It's never been more important for the water sector to communicate the real value of water. Water's one of the most underappreciated, undervalued core resources for human life. And when water's undervalued, it's much more challenging for organizations behind this vital resource to get people to take an interest in water matters, critical to the health of their communities.

Storytelling through content holds enormous potential for utilities to not only communicate the value of water but also build and nurture a relationship with their customers beyond the status quo, which is often marked by infrequent and transactional communications. The unfortunate reality is, utilities can lack trust and credibility with their customers simply because there's no prior, consistent history of positive or creative engagement.

If customers' only interactions with their water provider is paying their bill or receiving an email about a hosepipe ban, they'll naturally see utilities as faceless organizations that only reach out when they're chasing money or something's gone wrong.

On the other hand, when a prior relationship does exist between utilities and their customers, it helps build trust and loyalty, and it's much easier for water providers to affect positive change in their communities, whether it's asking people to change behavior, conserve more water, or accept water management solutions that are better for the environment, like recycled water.

Building a positive relationship

Storytelling and creative content can help water providers build a positive relationship with their customers in an engaging way. They can transform perspectives by telling the stories of the unsung heroes in their organizations — the operators, engineers, and innovators in the field who make sure quality water gets to people's taps. Stories should also include the CEO, but they must go beyond the CEO. There's lots of room for utilities to tell stories about water and the environment as well.

People want to relate in a human way and understand more about the amazing individuals and processes behind the scenes that bring the community crucial water services, and one of the best ways utilities can humanize the work they do is through storytelling.

Storytelling fundamentals

Look beyond water for storytelling inspiration

Organizations often look within their own industries for best practices, and when it comes to positive communications, there are some great examples in water, like NE Ohio Regional Sewer District profiled in this paper. But there's enormous value in looking further afield. Water companies can take inspiration from how other sectors tell stories that resonate with audiences.

They can learn from the amazing stories being told by organizations like Pixar and Disney, where story reigns as king. Stories employ emotion, novelty, and imagery. They make information stick in people's memories the way a list of facts simply can't. Stories make an impression in people's minds and bring important messages to life, and they build trust and connection between the teller and the listener. Most importantly, stories help to build a following between the audience and the characters.

Start with the "why" (don't get caught up in the "what")

Often, organizations get caught up in communicating the "what" of their stories — the capacity of a new facility, the technology (and many associated acronyms), or highly technical processes.

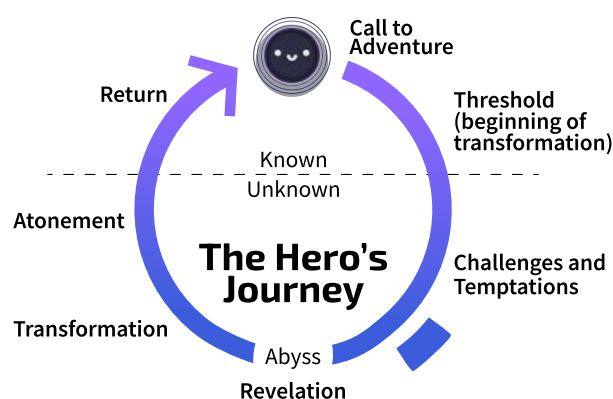
While these are elements to a story and necessary as follow up information, the "what" is probably not the thing people are most concerned about.

“When you tell a story, start with the “why.” Why should people care? Why is this important? What does this mean to people? It's important to take a step back and ask the question, why should this information be of interest to our utility's customer base?”

For example, if it's a new development, perhaps people care because it will provide new jobs and security to the region. Or perhaps people care because it will help provide water security for future generations.

When you tap into the “why” behind the information you want to share with your customers, you can more easily access the story's emotional value and that can often be used to create more meaningful engagement with your customers.

Consider the hero's journey framework



source: [The Hero's Journey Wikipedia](#)

When it comes to storytelling, one of the main challenges for utilities is to try to make everyday processes exciting and engaging. If you're highlighting a manager of a storage treatment center, or you're sharing a customer success story, how can you actually unpack that story in an engaging way?

Water utilities may gain some inspiration from a classic narrative framework called "the Hero's Journey," popularized by American writer Joseph Campbell. The hero's journey is a narrative archetype that has been present in myths, legends, and stories throughout history. It depicts the transformative journey of a protagonist who embarks on an adventure, faces various trials and challenges, and ultimately undergoes personal growth and self-discovery.

The hero's journey typically follows a pattern, starting with the call to adventure, where the hero is summoned to leave their ordinary world and embark on a quest. Along the way, they encounter mentors, allies, and adversaries, and are tested both physically and emotionally. Through these trials, the hero gains new skills, knowledge, and insights, ultimately reaching a climactic moment where they face their greatest challenge.

By overcoming this challenge, the hero returns home, often transformed, with newfound wisdom and a gift to share with their community.

Consider how the hero's journey framework can help you build compelling narratives that humanize the industry, raise awareness about water-related challenges, and encourage collective action towards a more sustainable water future. These narratives can inspire others to engage with their water utility, adopt sustainable practices, and appreciate the value of water in their own lives.

Content fuels your outreach strategy

Explore content channels your customers use

The way people consume content and media has evolved and changed over the years. Traditional channels used by water companies have and continue to include email, paper bills, and SMS messages. However, with the democratization of creative communications tools and channels over the years, utility communications teams can easily leverage to build a meaningful relationship with their customers.

Proactive water companies will explore the variety of tools and channels available to them to find the ones their customers use and engage with. That way, they can get in front of customers with stories that actively build trust with the people they serve.

Social media channels like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and video and audio channels like YouTube and Spotify, can give water providers a way to reach their customers with interesting, helpful, or simply entertaining content, like photos, videos, interviews, and even podcasts.

And by taking a multi-pronged approach, utilities can repurpose the content they create for one channel to apply to other channels, streamlining the process and expanding their reach.

Content strategy — a three stage process

Your content strategy goes much further than the occasional press release. A content strategy provides utilities with a blueprint, a plan of action to help drip-feed content consistently around key people and developments in the organization. When organizations consistently provide valuable and reliable content, they establish trust and credibility with their customers. Regularly engaging with customers through content helps build rapport, loyalty, and a sense of connection.

1. Awareness

The awareness stage of a content strategy refers to the initial stage of the customer journey where they know very little about your organization, its mission, its values, or its challenges. At this stage, your content is typically designed to build awareness about certain aspects of your utility's work, so you can effectively lay the foundation for a better relationship with your customers.

During the awareness stage of your content strategy, you produce informative and valuable content that addresses the challenges or questions your audience may have.

For example, while within the water industry phrases such as “water scarcity,” “contaminants of emerging concern,” or “PFAS” are well understood, how well are they known to the wider public? It's a challenge to communicate a new pilot project on PFAS, if there is a lack of awareness of what PFAS is. The awareness phase is where you build that knowledge-base with your customers by providing a series of valuable and relevant content that interests, educates, entertains, or inspires your customers.

2. Thought leadership

Thought leadership allows water companies to demonstrate their deep knowledge and expertise by sharing valuable insights, innovative ideas, and industry trends, while also connecting customers with the “main characters” of the organization.

In films and TV we tend to focus on key characters or protagonists. Hours of entertainment is crafted with cleverly written scripts to help audiences ‘buy in’ to characters, whether good or bad.

“
In adapting this for the water industry, it's important to identify who in the organization are the “main characters” who have the expertise as well as the likeability to become the face behind the announcement and development.
”

Once identified, a series of content, whether interviews, soundbites, and videos can be used to help position this individual as an authority, which helps build trust. Consistency and cadency is key here. For example, if the utility is embarking on a digital transformation journey, then naturally someone in the position of Chief Digital Officer, or Smart Water Manager, would be well positioned to be the spokesperson for this work. This helps make this person reachable, relatable and relevant through regular content.

3. Call to action

A call to action (CTA) in content strategy is a specific directive or instruction given to your audience, urging them to take a particular action. It is a crucial component of any content piece, whether it's a blog post, website page, social media post, or email.

A CTA could be as simple as “click here for more information,” “sign up for our monthly newsletter,” “leave a comment below” or even “don’t flush wipes.” By including well-placed CTAs in your content strategy, you can effectively guide your customers towards taking desired actions, ultimately driving engagement and achieving your water utility’s goals.

Content is king, but engagement is queen

There’s a well known phrase in communications: “**Content is king, but engagement is queen, and the lady rules the house.**” In other words, content is king, but it’s also ubiquitous — there is now more content to consume across multiple channels than ever before. Everyone’s fighting for the split attention of audiences. In order to be effective, content needs its queen — engagement.

Content needs to interest and engage your audience. A well-planned and thought-out content strategy can provide a blueprint for utilities, mapping out the key topics, thought leaders, and channels, so creative engagement can shine through.

Inspiring Water Campaigns

Utility creates craft beer made from highly treated reclaimed wastewater

About the campaign

Singapore's National Water Agency ([PUB](#)) partnered with local craft brewery Brewerkz to produce a [craft beer](#) brewed from highly treated reclaimed wastewater. The campaign raises awareness about water scarcity and PUB's innovative recycled water program NEWater.

Why it works

With videos of beer lovers [trying NEWbrew](#) and showing how it's made, this campaign leads with curiosity and drives people to learn more about safe highly treated reclaimed wastewater.



Credit: [PUB on Facebook](#), May 2022

How water utilities can build internal and external trust using social media



John Gonzalez

*Communications and Social Media
at Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer
District (NEORSRSD)*

How water utilities can build internal and external trust using social media



John Gonzalez

Communications and Social Media at Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSRD)

Today, many stumble upon Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSRD)'s Twitter account and are surprised and delighted by the creative, humorous, sentimental, and entertaining content coming from a sewer utility.

It may seem effortless now, but the truth is [@neorsd](#)'s success is the result of years of building trust internally and externally so that the communications team has the freedom to experiment with content and use social media channels as they're meant to be used: with humor, humility, and humanity.

As it turns out, sewer humor struck a chord with the people of Northeast Ohio, helping to humanize the great work our organization does for the community while building trust and transparency with customers.

Here are some lessons we learned over the years about building internal and external trust for creative freedom on social media.

How to start rebuilding trust using social media: the story behind Northeast Ohio Regional District's Twitter account

Our current online presence was set in motion over ten years ago, sparked by an interruption of trust with our customers. At the time, a leader in our organization was indicted for embezzlement, causing NEORSRD's credibility to be questioned and severing the trust and good reputation we'd built over the years in our region. In the face of this breach, we owed it to our customers to develop a more active communications strategy, to reach out to them and show them that this was not the way NEORSRD did business, and to find ways to rebuild transparency with our customers.



NE Ohio Regional Sewer District @neorsd

fondly remember, of all the hours you scrolled twitter in the bathroom, sewers were there for you first.

and we'll be there for you last.



source: twitter.com/neorsd

Start by meeting customers where they are

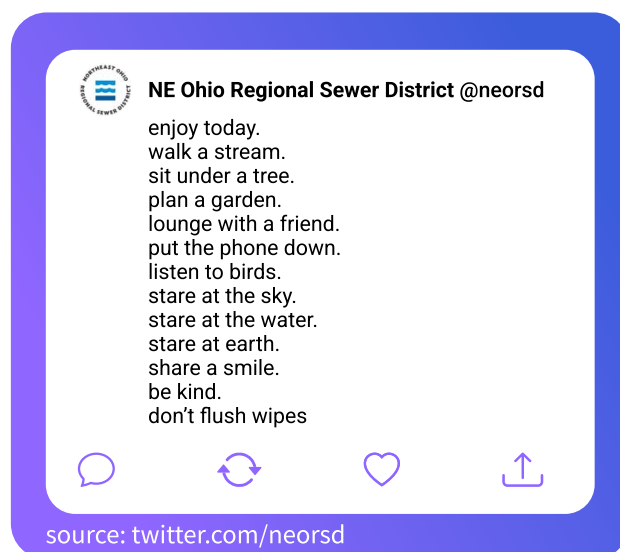
A starting point for our communications strategy was our commitment to meeting customers where they are. We knew we couldn't expect customers to show up to community meetings so we could reassure them we had their best interests in mind. We had to find the places where our customers were talking about the issues and show up to engage in those difficult conversations.

Be responsive and transparent

Interestingly, we found the comment sections of our local newspaper's online articles proved a good channel to demonstrate our responsiveness and transparency with customers. We began to actively respond to media requests and we watched for online articles where we could answer questions, provide more detail and context, clarify misunderstandings, and correct information.

The tone of the comment sections and news articles began to change, and we noticed less hostility in the conversations. People appreciated us readily jumping in and providing information they sometimes didn't even realize they were asking for. The experience made us realize we could broaden our reach and have a similar presence on other forums and platforms to help rebuild and maintain a relationship of trust with our customers.

The more people have to sign off on a poem or a one-off random reference to a trending meme, the more likely you'll miss the moment and your post won't have the same impact.



Ideally, you get to a point where you have enough freedom to be creative, and you don't have to run every post by leadership before you post it. But the trust you need from leadership to post freely doesn't happen overnight — that kind of internal trust is earned by being transparent with leadership and demonstrating successes along your journey with social media.

For us, our initial success engaging in our local news comment sections demonstrated to leadership that not only could engage online responsibly, there was a clear benefit and value for customers and our organization. We continued to demonstrate these successes to leadership as we built our presence online.

Give leadership a plan of attack

There's always going to be inherent risk when posting online. That's why it's important for both your communications team and your leadership team to know how you plan to respond to challenges, minimize risks, and maximize benefits.

How to build internal trust to have the flexibility to post as you want

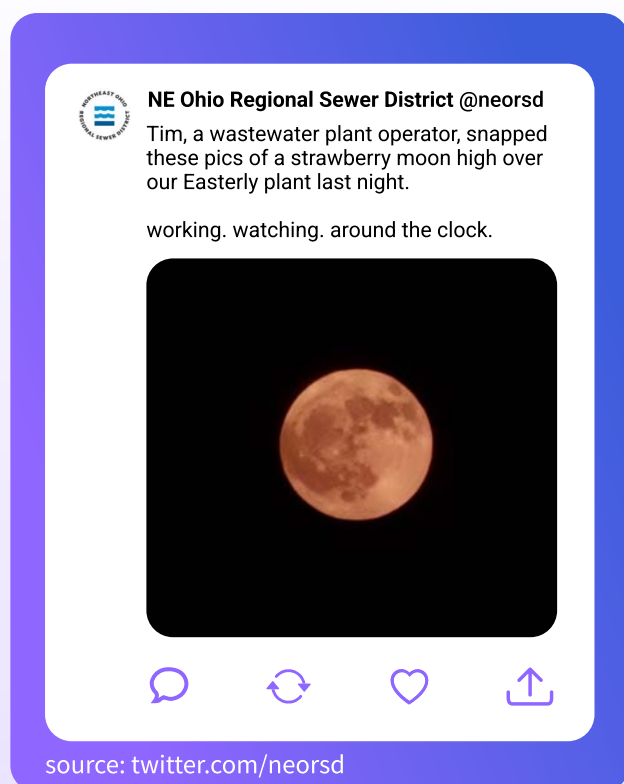
Demonstrate to leadership you can engage responsibly online

If you have a lengthy review process, it can hinder your efforts to use social media in the way it's supposed to be used. Twitter, for example, is meant to be quick, timely, and follow the trends of the moment.

Give your leadership a plan for how you'll manage your social media accounts and how you'll begin to establish a presence across the channels you intend to work with. Be transparent and keep them updated. Let leadership know if you're creating content that might be controversial, might walk the line, or is a type of content you haven't done before.

Tell leadership your stories of success and make sure they recognize that social media can have an impact. If you face a challenge or failure, let them know, "this didn't work, but here's why, and we're going to try something different."

Our leadership has an expectation that the communications team will be communicative and responsive to customers, to inquiries, and use social media channels how they're meant to be used, with a conversational, personal tone.



Not every organization will embrace communication in the same way, and that's a big challenge. But try to split resources up across a few different opportunities where you can find support, where it makes the most sense, and over time, with the appropriate amount of experimentation and demonstrated success, you can build trust internally that gives you more creative freedom over time.

Look for advocates at the leadership level

It helps tremendously to have an advocate in leadership, someone you talk to regularly with a voice at the chief level who supports what you do. We're fortunate that one of our chief executives directly oversees our communications team. Having her voice of advocacy at the leadership table has been critical. Look for advocates that have a seat at the table.

Celebrate staff on social media

Another way to build great relationships and trust internally is to work with and give attribution to the talents and storytellers in your organization. As you put content together, ask staff for insight, expertise, and stories.

This kind of creative exchange with staff demonstrates that you value employees' knowledge and their work and you want to share their story because what they do matters. When you do that, more internal advocates and storytellers will reach out to you because you're demonstrating they can trust your work. You'll likely find people are very willing to help support you to get the right information out to the public and help your organization's reputation in the community.

How to shape content that humanizes utilities

Experiment to find a voice that resonates

Over the years, we've experimented with several social media accounts and different kinds of content. Early on, the content we shared was largely what you would expect from a utility's social media account: board minutes, links to project updates, traffic impacts. It was informational, but it wasn't necessarily exciting or engaging content.

“

Around 2015, we began to experiment by using Twitter more as it was designed to be used, as a place to craft content with personality, timely delivery, and quick response times.

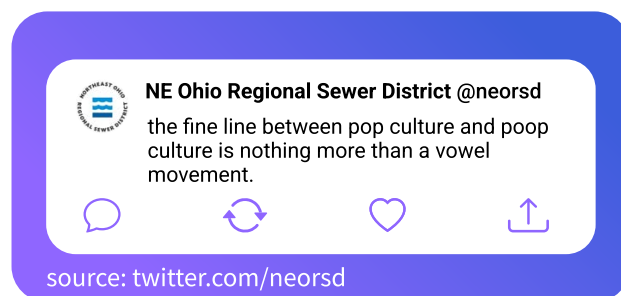
”

We learned from experiments with our mascot Wally Waterdrop's Twitter account. On Wally's account we could tweet as a character with a personality, and we noticed he garnered a different kind of engagement from our formal NEORSR account. We thought, why not apply the same approach to the voice of our official NEORSR account and see how it tracks?

Humanizing sewer work

We recognized we had a funny angle that could work to our benefit: sewer humor. We figured anyone who's ever had a parent spout dad jokes at them would probably have the patience for some toilet jokes in their feed.

Our experiments with sewer humor on Twitter ended up giving us much more attention than we expected.



We'd hit a way to make our work more relatable to our customers, to present what our organization does in a much more human light. It clearly resonated with people, and we suddenly had engagement with our formal Twitter account that simply wasn't there before.

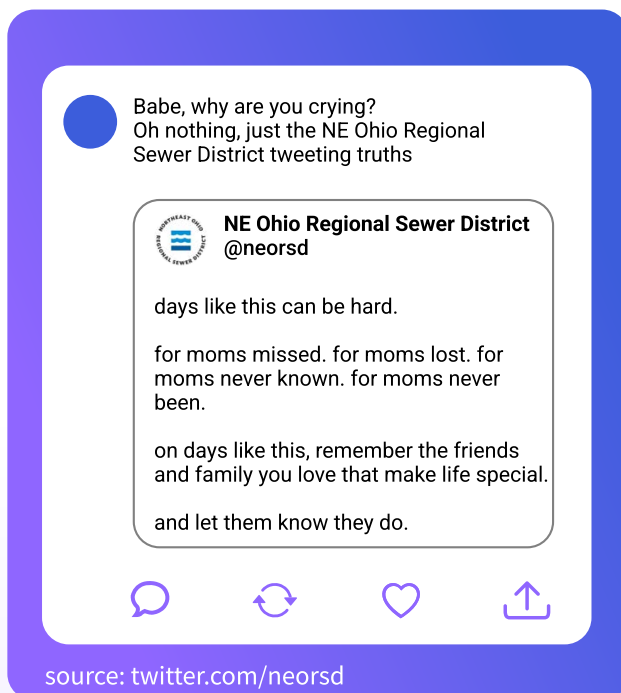
The uniqueness of sewer humor

Because NEORSR is a sewer utility, we may have more flexibility than a water utility when it comes to applying humor to our social media accounts. We don't have the same type of service with the same kinds of high-level emergency alerts, for example, which may give us a little more creative freedom.

But whether you're crafting content that evokes humor, some emotion, sentiment, or simply removing jargon from the conversation, it moves people towards a better understanding of utility work that most people never even think about.

Guiding principles: Humor, humility, and humanity

If you're a utility that wants to have success on social media, the best thing you can do is be human in your posts. Be conversational, creative, and use the platform how it's meant to be used. And if you can combine that with humor, humility, and humanity, you're going to be able to shape your content with ease and protect yourself when things don't go perfectly.



Don't try to do everything at once

Don't try to do everything at once, but be willing to explore the social media landscape and experiment with your accounts to see what resonates with people.

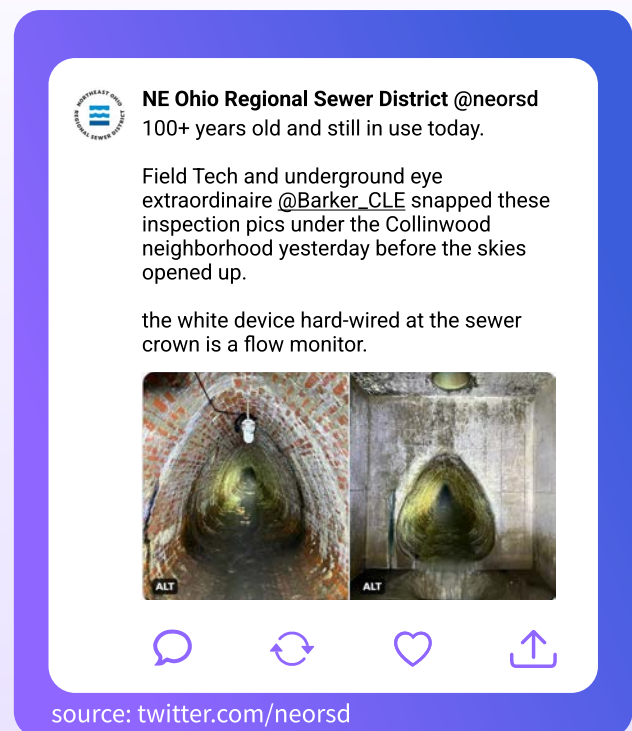
Most of our attention is on our Twitter account because we've seen the biggest benefit there, but other social media channels, like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or LinkedIn, for example, may work better for your service area.



Balance content calendars with spur-of-the-moment trends

When it comes to content calendars, we have a yearly outreach calendar that keeps our eye on monthly events, so we can create content that draws attention to those events. We also have seasonal treatment processes that we highlight on social media, so customers know what's happening and they have a way to learn more about it. Likewise, we have a podcast, so we try to create content that complements the topics we'll be covering.

Beyond that, the approach that has gotten us the most traction is working on the spur of the moment, so we can hit on what people are talking about. Two people in our department closely monitor our social accounts so that we can be responsive in real time.



Impacts beyond social media

It's difficult to quantify or track the impact our Twitter account has beyond our direct followers. We know around 60% of our almost 60,000 followers on Twitter are NEORSO customers, and the rest are people beyond our service area. But when you put that into perspective alongside the fact that we serve one million residents in northeast Ohio, it's a very small percentage of customers seeing our tweets every day. But anecdotally we know our Twitter account is a topic of conversation at events and our employees are proud of the way it shines a light on their work. We know that we educate our followers and gain advocates in the community who then make changes to their behavior and spread the message to others. And we know we've raised awareness about our organization's work on Twitter in a way that we haven't achieved on other platforms.

Keep this in mind: social media changes faster than most utilities will be able to create content. New platforms, new controversies, algorithm updates, it can be hard to keep up.

“

Don't burn yourself out.

Always put your communication goals first, and work to determine where current social media trends best suit your agency and your customers. We've said elsewhere that our values are not dependent on any one social media platform — social media is simply one place of many where we choose to live them out.

”

Inspiring Water Campaigns

The Drop Store – a market for a world in water crisis

About the campaign

An online shop for all your dystopian needs, [the Drop Store](http://thedropstore.org) gives you a glimpse into what consumer products could look like in a water-scarce future. You can browse products like a [single potato](#) (only \$129!), [a pill that tastes like pizza](#), or [Diva Divers](#) – flippers with heels, so you can navigate flash flooding in style.

Why it works

This tongue-in-cheek campaign uses humor to engage audiences with the serious implications of the global water crisis. It also offers a downloadable social media kit so people can easily spread The Drop Store's message on their own channels.



Credit: thedropstore.org

Section 4

How to leverage “community nodes”
to improve public perception



Paul Davison

*CEO at Proteus Communications
Group*

How to leverage “community nodes” to improve public perception



Paul Davison

CEO at Proteus Communications Group

When a biomass company failed spectacularly to garner public support for a new biomass plant in the small town of Grangemouth, Scotland, any prospective energy project coming in behind them had to avoid the same outcome: a community that felt unheard, skeptical, angry, and ultimately derailed the project after several years of costly consultations. How then, not long after the biomass project failed to come to fruition, did an energy-from-waste plant get the community’s support and approval in under a year?

While this may not be a water-sector communications example, any organization that deals with critical infrastructure will find lessons in the approach Proteus Communications Group (PCG) took to consultations with the Grangemouth community, particularly utilities who have a **big change or a controversial project coming down the pipe**.

Here, I draw on our experience consulting with the community of Grangemouth on a new energy-from-waste project and outline how we refined our messaging, avoided knee-jerk reactions, and leveraged community nodes to properly consult residents so they felt genuinely heard, informed, and able to shape their own opinion about the project—without feeling sold to.

Identify common values and communicate your project’s “why”

Identify common values between your project and the community

One of the key starting points for your dialogue with a community about an upcoming change or project is to get a feel for the main issues driving the community and identify some commonalities between the project goals and community’s values. Try to pick up on any subtleties of what concerns people locally.

In the case of Grangemouth, we formed a preliminary idea of what was important to the community by reviewing the media coverage from the biomass plant project. While the media coverage focused primarily on the issue of atmospheric pollution, we identified an emotional subtext that was confirmed later by explicitly asking for feedback about the community’s concerns. Emotions ran particularly high by the fact that a biomass company showed up without any prior connection to the community or any plan to provide economic value to the community in the form of jobs.

In other words, it didn't matter that Grangemouth would have the benefit of a new energy source, residents weren't buying into the biomass project because

they felt the economic value belonged to shareholders and stockholders. This kind of objection is common for small working class communities.

Fortunately, the energy-from-waste project had a prior connection to the community and was going to provide jobs that fit the level of education and qualifications of residents. We quickly identified this was a crucial message to get across when communicating the new project proposal on the heels of one that went over so poorly.

Communicate the “why” before the details

In the early stages of dialogue with a community, it's important to focus on communicating the project's “why” before getting into the details. In Grangemouth, we spent at least six months sharing the “why” behind the project goals. We did this so there was a good foundational understanding of the basics within the community before moving onto a more detailed dialogue about the project.

When you focus on communicating the project's higher-level purpose and goals prior to getting into the details, you can avoid triggering misunderstandings and knee-jerk emotional reactions that cause resistance before residents have all the information they need to form their own balanced opinion.

In this case, the “why” behind the project was that an already existing company and employer in the community, a chemical production facility, needed to reduce its costs by reducing its reliance on oil, so it could compete more effectively internationally. The company was looking at alternative energy sources, and the energy-from-waste plant, using local waste, was their preferred alternative.

The project had the benefit of securing jobs at the chemical plant while also creating more jobs in the process.

What are “community nodes” and how do they support your communications?

What are community nodes?

Community nodes are places in a community where information tends to be passed between residents and other groups or organizations. It's where already existing lines of communication and dialogue occur and people tend to have discussions. Community nodes generally fall into three groups: leisure, education, and healthcare. Libraries, hairdressers, barbers, post offices, public houses, and news agencies are good examples of community nodes.

How does briefing community nodes help improve public perception?

When you brief community nodes before more in-depth consultations and community outreach activities, you allow your core messages (i.e., the project's “why” and common values) to settle into a community's communication networks for a while. This is a key step in improving public perception because during later phases of your consultations, the informed community nodes sustain your core messages and correct misinformation as people talk more about the project in their day-to-day conversations.

Community nodes were crucial to supporting the second phase of our consultations in Grangemouth. Residents were more open and prepared for the project details in phase two because of the work we did to brief the community in phase one. It meant that instead of strong

adverse reactions to the details of the project, residents came to meetings more open-minded and curious for more information and discussion.

Even if residents didn't like or support the project, they were already aware of its main goals, and the emotional charge you might expect from an energy-from-waste proposal wasn't there, allowing the community and the company to have a more constructive dialogue and give beneficial feedback about the project.

Brief community nodes—but don't sell your project

Inform, don't sell.

It's critical—fundamental—not to “sell” the project to community nodes (or at any stage of dialogue with a community), especially when the project involves controversial change.

This can be hard for companies who want their communications teams to drum up support for their cause and are eager to have the projects approved. But it's very important not to add any spin or salesy tone to the information you share because as soon as you do, your vested interest jumps out a mile, and that immediately creates resistance within a community before they have all the information they need to form their own opinion.

Instead, **provide neutral information about the project's “why” and shared values** as discussed earlier. Certainly, be transparent about and flag the company's preferred actions, but let people ask questions and give them sources for further information instead of getting into the details.

“

Remember, people can dislike a project or a change and at the same time understand why it's occurring and its value to the community.

”

The primary goal at this stage is to get as many people as possible to understand the project goals and its implications for them as a community in a neutral way. Your goal is to put community nodes in an informed position, so when people have discussions in these places, there are other people present who are knowledgeable about the subject.

Community nodes are not ambassadors for your project

Community nodes, and the people that form them, are not ambassadors for the project. You are not in any way inducing them to share a positive message about the project. In fact, community nodes can oppose the project completely. They can choose to share or not to share the information you give them. The goal with community nodes is not to gain ambassadors but to build an informed awareness about the project into the fabric of the community's informal communications.

Other best practices for community-node engagement

Brief community nodes in-person

Brief community nodes with an in-person conversation and simple hardcopy briefing materials they can share with residents.

For example, we invited Grangemouth's hairdressers and barbers to a meeting complete with tea, coffee, and biscuits and we talked to them about what we were doing and explained to them why we were talking to them.

Barbers and hairdressers were a great group of people to brief in Grangemouth. During phase two of our consultations, people who attended community meetings would bring up the topic of the energy-from-waste plant while getting their haircut. Then, because someone within the barbers or hairdressers already knew about it, they were able to discuss it and add their own views to it.

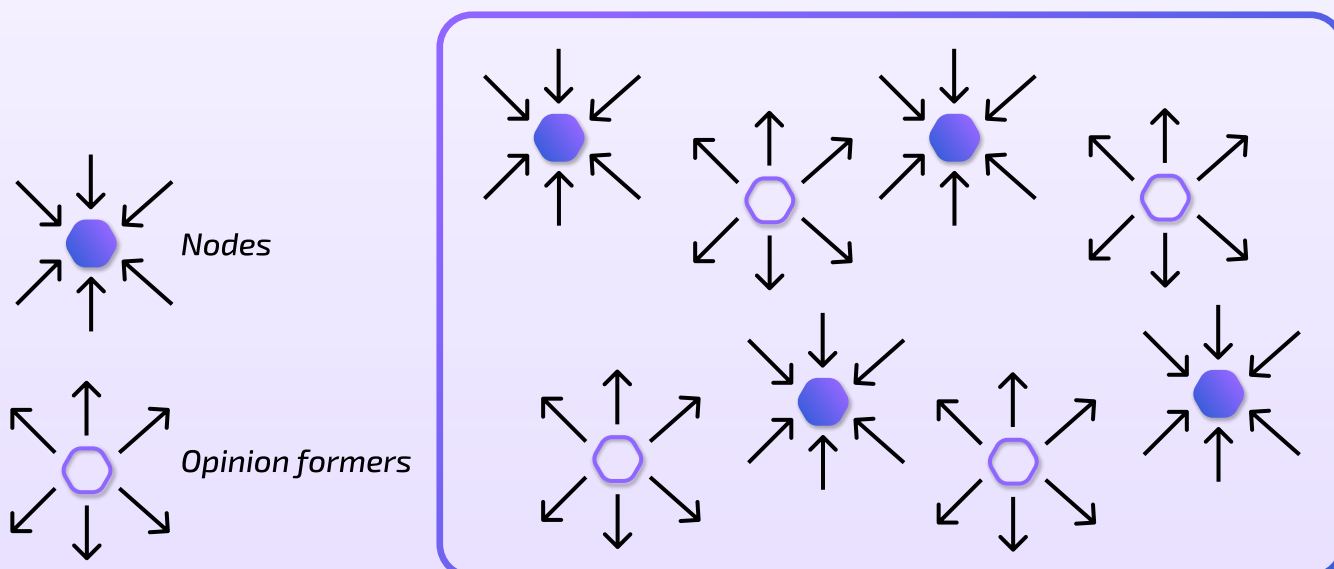
Pub owners and pub goers are also a good community node and a nice informal way to quickly brief lots of people in a relaxed environment. But you've got to be careful with pubs. Catch pub-goers early because it can get a little out of hand if you go too late in the evening, and you might end up in a bit of trouble!

Give community nodes easy materials to share information

In Grangemouth, we produced two materials for community nodes to easily share information about the project. First, we created a 6-inch leaflet with key messages about the project. Second, we produced a small card, about the size of a business card, where one side of the card had the key messages, and the other side included a QR code where residents could find further information.

Because of the code on the cards, we could track where in the community people were receiving the cards and actually accessing more information. Barbers and hairdressers found these cards useful, handing them out at the cash register at the end of haircuts.

Community nodes & opinion informers



Engage the broader community; don't stop at residents adjacent to project

Remember to brief community nodes and engage with residents in a larger geographical area than the residents who are immediately adjacent to an upcoming project. Typically, residents who are outside the first handful of miles from a project will lack interest in the project, but don't stop engaging those people.

This is important because when you engage with and gain feedback from across an entire community, your arguments and positioning with local authorities have more credibility because you can demonstrate your wide reach. As you move further away geographically from the location of a project, some of your messaging may change, but the approach to leveraging community nodes is the same.

Hard work pays off

Near the end of phase-two consultations in Grangement, our team did a door-knocking exercise, and found the level of knowledge within the community about the project was exceptionally high. About 78% of people we spoke to were aware of our key messages, and the majority of those people didn't actually attend any of our events but got the information from others in the community.

In the end, Grangemouth residents felt the project made sense as it would both secure jobs and the competitive ability of the chemical factory while also creating new long-term jobs at the energy-from-waste plant. Residents, piggybacking on the engagement work we did, even developed a community council to have more regular discussions with local government.

Water utilities serving small, medium, or large communities, can glean lessons from our methods and experience with community nodes in Grangemouth. Consider how you might leverage community nodes in your service area to improve public perception and extend the reach of your utility's messaging for regular operations or new projects.

Inspiring Water Campaigns

Northumbrian Water Group (NWG) hosts Festival billed “Glastonbury of water”

About the campaign

An annual Innovation Festival put on by Northumbrian Water Group (NWG) brings together diverse innovators and disciplines from across the globe and mixes music, comedy, fun themed events, and celebrity guest speakers. With “sprints, hacks, and daily dashes,” the festival condenses three years of work to find solutions to today’s water problems into 5 days of fun.

Why it works

NWG’s innovation festival turns the traditional utility conference on its head by doing away with formalities, and bringing people together in a fun, refreshing, and human way that leaves festival goers energized instead of drained. It works because NWG goes beyond the transactional to connect on a more entertaining and engaging level that forges valuable connections and supports real water projects.



Credit: [Innovation Festival website](#)

Final remarks

Don't wait. Start now.

There's a plethora of creative opportunities and tools your utility can use to improve interactions with the people you serve, and this paper talks about some of those tried-and-true methods. Meet your customers where they are, whether that's online or in person. Build trust with consistent communications and positive interactions over time. Start with the “why” when it comes to connecting your utility's activities to the values of your customers, so you can form that common ground and connection.

While developing solid communications and building trust with customers doesn't happen overnight, and the process will look different depending on your capacity and your audience, the most important part for utilities, big and small, to remember is to start cultivating a relationship with your customers now. It will pay off with time.

Know more about Qatium

Qatium is an easy-to-use water management platform for utilities of all sizes. We give operations & planning teams full visibility to run their networks effortlessly in an open, digital environment. In particular, Qatium supports rural or underserved utilities —often most impacted by climate change— by offering our core functionality for free.

