

Construction Zone

Guarding Against Customer Complaints

by Susan Hall and Ellen G. Miller

Most water utilities, even the smallest, take at least a few measures to let customers know of construction projects. For many systems the communication is limited to one or two public meetings or written notices about a proposed line extension or a new water tank—notifications that funding or permitting agencies have required.

But daily life is hectic, especially for mid-sized and smaller utilities serving a population of 50,000 and under. Why even consider more customer communication than the bare minimum? To show customers that they are getting value for their dollars and inconvenience during construction.

"Our customers are our partners," said Franklyn W. Pogge, deputy director of the Kansas City (Mo.) Water Services Dept. "It's essential to provide them with as much information as possible—and opportunities for two-way discussions—about potential capital improvement projects."

Timing Counts

A new treatment plant or water main expansion provides savvy

systems with an opportunity to strengthen relationships with customers. Some utilities wait until construction starts. Others get the word out about each project phase, from the initial discussion to planning, design, construction, and postconstruction.

What's their goal? To ensure customers know the what, when, how, and why of a project. After all, customer dollars pay the bills for construction projects.

Early Start

Communication steps to ensure that people are getting the information they need include:

Neighborhood meetings. Invite residents to a conveniently scheduled meeting, preferably held in the evening, to discuss the project's purpose, length, and likely neighborhood impact. Generally, these meetings are for information purposes only, but useful input can be gathered from the public on items such as water tank colors or landscaping preferences.

Customer mailings. Send a brochure or letter via first-class postage from the board president or other head honcho to personalize the message.

Bill stuffers. Save on postage by including needed facts to customers with the regular bill.

Newsletters. Highlight the project in a special edition of the utility's quarterly newsletter. Include frequently asked questions (FAQs) for a quick read.

Media coverage. Get the word out through the local and regional media—newspapers, TV, and talk radio. Prepare a media kit, including a news release, detailed fact sheet, and FAQs, to distribute to the press.

Speakers bureau. Inform community movers and shakers about the upcoming project's benefits to the community with a presentation by a manager or board president at civic meetings such as the Rotary, chamber of commerce, and Junior League.

Signage. Alert drivers to upcoming likely disruptions in traffic patterns with signs. This is a "must do" item.

Homeowners association newsletters. Send association newsletters the same press release that went to the media, asking for placement in the next issue.

Focus groups. Worried about traffic jams near a sports arena, amusement park, or mall during construction? Consider a focus group to get ideas on ways to get the word out and minimize complaints. Select eight to 12 people, bring them together once for no more than two hours, and have a trained facilitator get the discussion going. *Tip: provide light food in return for the participants' time.*

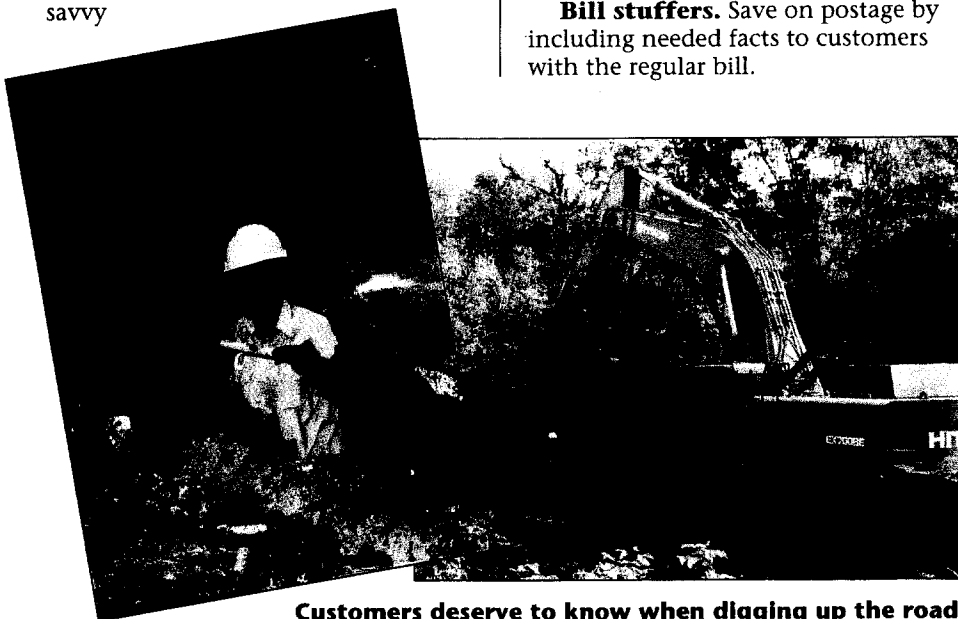
Web site. Add a page to the municipal or utility Web site that provides the ABCs of the new capital improvement project.

Hard Hat Zone

When bulldozers and cranes appear, it's time for customer communications to move to high gear, including:

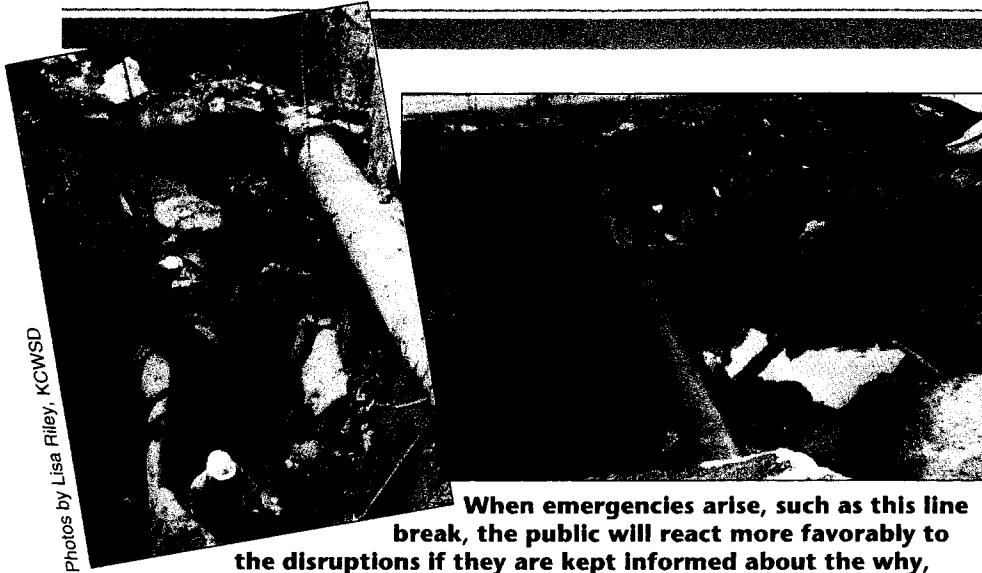
Progress signs. Visual devices, such as a thermometer graphic or map, can track weekly progress.

Traffic alerts. Nothing gets customers on the phone or talk radio faster than unsuspected, weeks-long traffic tie-ups. Get the message out about location, duration, and likely degree of disruption. Using all methods—from the media to bill stuffers to signage—will help let people know what is planned.



Customers deserve to know when digging up the road for repairs (left) or new construction projects (above) will disrupt service, limit access, or cost the public money.

Photos by Lisa Riley, KCWSD



When emergencies arise, such as this line break, the public will react more favorably to the disruptions if they are kept informed about the why, what, where, when, and how.

Service impact. Sometimes the construction project requires temporarily cutting off water service. Providing a minimum of 48 hours' notice will go a long way to cooling customer tempers. Communications methods include phone banks, radio/TV/newspaper notices, and announcements or postings at civic, religious, and social centers.

Traffic report. Help drivers choose alternate routes with print and electronic media reports on construction.

Photos and videos. Taking photos and videos is common during construction projects. Get extra mileage from your videos and photos by sharing them with the local media, particularly in less urban areas.

Extra Return on Investment

Savvy systems take advantage of the postconstruction phase to get extra return on investment for the dollars and time already spent on customer communications. After the project is completed, follow up with the public to demonstrate the value of their investment and to keep the communication lines open for future projects.

Seek satisfied customer comments. Quotes from real people benefiting from improved system capacity get reader attention in followup stories distributed to the local media, the utility newsletter, or an informational ad in the newspaper.

Take photos. Mains and lines may be 12 or more feet underground, but appealing photos of kids playing outdoors in a sprinkler on a hot day or of gardeners carefully watering flowers

and vegetables can illustrate the benefits of the improved system.

Tip: Contrast these "after" shots with those taken during construction.

Invite continuing public participation. Set up an educational booth at local fairs and social events; hold an open house and tours of new facilities. Combine the open house with photo opportunities to bring in

community leaders and elected officials. They love to show support of something that enhances the community—especially when cameras are at the ready.

Recognize employees. In-house staff are almost always heavily involved in capital improvement projects, whether as liaison with the consulting engineer or as the utility's own inspector during construction. News of awards to staff who go above and beyond can be distributed to local media, and a photo enhances the possibility of publication.

Fewer Complaints

"Sometimes we engineers get so engrossed in the construction project that we lose track of customer concerns," said Ed Ryser, manager of systems engineering for the Kansas City Water Services Dept. "A thorough customer communications program helps us do our work better by cutting down on complaints. Folks may not like a traffic disruption, but they know why it's happening."

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Caution: Construction Zone

How's your system doing on customer communications for major construction projects?

A B C D F Range = A for excellent, F for failing

- 1. Newspaper articles start when the board/council considers the project.
- 2. A mailer goes out inviting people to attend public hearings.
- 3. Newspaper articles appear regularly before, during, and after construction.
- 4. System representatives appear on radio and TV talk shows.
- 5. Employees understand the project's why, how, when, and costs.
- 6. Board/council or manager speaks to civic and business groups.
- 7. Elected officials are kept aware of why, how, when, and especially costs.
- 8. The quarterly customer newsletter includes status reports.
- 9. Customer complaints about the project are handled within three working days.
- 10. Easements are handled in person, early on.
- 11. Customers are notified at least 48 hours before water is cut off.
- 12. Project information is posted regularly on the Web site.

Scoring A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = -1

41-48 Outstanding! Consider writing articles for industry magazines or Web sites.

32-40 Pretty good, but look at ways to improve during the next construction project.

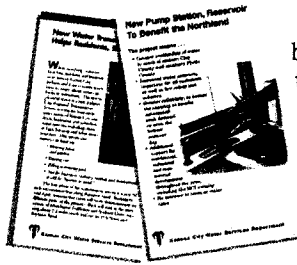
21-31 Watch out! The grapevine could be ready to take over.

< 21 Beware of negative media coverage and perhaps mass meetings. Discuss this at next month's board/council meeting!

Adapted from Getting Results From Your Experts: Engineers, Attorneys and More! Ellen G. Miller and Elmer Ronnebaum, 1998. Courtesy Kansas Rural Water Association.

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Along this line, be sure to keep the utility staff, particularly customer service representatives, informed about the

project and its

progress. The staff who answer the phone or read the meters are more likely to field customer complaints than the engineer behind the scenes. The staff will be much better equipped to answer questions and reassure customers if they, too, know what's going on. *Tip: Provide the customer service staff with the FAQs, the fact sheets, and a map to refer to when talking to customers.*

CCR Sandwich

Time was when only large utilities worried about customer communications. No longer. The 1996 amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act require utilities to produce an annual consumer

confidence report (CCR), introducing a substantial change in many utility practices. The CCR requires almost all public water systems, regardless of size, to tell customers annually about water quality and possible health effects.

Don't be like the small Midwestern municipality that feared creating a CCR. The water department had never communicated with its customers. The staff worried that customers would interpret the CCR in a negative way and would think they were being poisoned. Given America's cultural phobia about chemicals, that is not a paranoid interpretation. If it had communicated all along with its customers, this utility would have already established a reputation of trust and reliability that would have overridden the concerns about the CCR.

Instead of serving a huge, hard-to-digest wad of annual information, more utilities are serving up a CCR sandwich. The annual CCR is the middle of the sandwich; other more frequent communication methods—from quarterly newsletters to Web sites—are the two pieces of bread.

Construction projects provide excellent material for a CCR sandwich. They typically last several weeks or months and have many phases. That upcoming water tank or line extension can produce a steady stream of customer communications.

Proving Value

Construction projects offer an unparalleled opportunity to strengthen the customer-utility partnership. Customer communications is a "must do" part of those projects. Why? It demonstrates the value customers receive from the debt their children and grandchildren will pay off over the next 20 or 30 years.

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Question of the Month *continued from page 3*

Rationing only works on metered systems. Metering itself has been shown to reduce water use, and the benefits of metering are such that AWWA has a policy statement on the practice of metering. Rationing calls for a per customer water allotment that can be guaranteed to be delivered to each customer's residence. Meter readings must be taken frequently enough to know if the customers are complying with the rationing requirements.

In small water utilities, a board member or other member of the community may be the person who follows up on customer violations. A small utility can adopt a customized plan to realistically fit the needs of its unique community. Be sure to include the appeals procedures established by your utility and your governing agency.

The effect of short-term emergency drought-response actions will be minimized if an effective long-term conservation plan is already in place. Establishing water rates that encourage conservation is strongly recommended as part of any long-term plan.

Public information is also a critical part of the water conservation process. The public needs to know what is

expected of them, and effective communication makes them partners in protecting the community's most essential resource. Make sure that the information you share is as accurate as possible. Once public confidence is lost, it is extremely hard to regain, making it even more difficult to get the community behind future crisis-response activities.

Some of the information presented here was taken from AWWA's *Back to Basics Guide to Water Conservation*. For a free copy of this guide or the AWWA policy statement on metering, call the Small Utility Network at (800) 366-0107. For a more comprehensive guide to setting up a conservation plan, *Water Conservation Guidebook for Small and Medium-Sized Utilities* is available through the WaterWiser program for a small charge.

For more information on the guidebook, WaterWiser, or water conservation in general visit the WaterWiser Web site at <www.waterwiser.org>, call WaterWiser directly at (800) 559-9855, or e-mail bewiser@waterwiser.org.

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