



We're All In This Together: How Do We Best Tell the Story of Rates & Charges of our Utilities — Michelle Zdrodowski & Nicolette Bateson, GLWA

Investing in Strategic Communications About Rate Changes

Suzanne Brown and Marci Davis

Key Takeaways

Clayton County Water Authority (CCWA) created an award-winning messaging campaign to build awareness of the need for rate adjustments to meet short- and longer-term goals and objectives.

The multipronged communications campaign emphasized the utility's mission of providing high-quality water and service, along with the return on investment for customers.

The lessons learned during CCWA's "I'm Invested" campaign can help other utilities harness messaging to engage stakeholders and be successful amid challenging situations.

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Clayton County Water Authority (CCWA)

- ◆ Clayton County Water Authority (CCWA) (Georgia)
- ◆ Source: Journal AWWA – November 2022
- ◆ Key Points
 - ◆ Award winning messaging campaign to build awareness of the need for rate adjustments to meet short – and longer-term goals and objectives.
 - ◆ Features lessons learned during CCWA's "I'm Invested" campaign to engage stakeholders and be successful amid challenging situations.

Sweetwater Authority

- ◆ Sweetwater Authority (California)
- ◆ Source: Journal AWWA – April 2020
- ◆ Key Points
 - ◆ Clearly explain why a rate study was being performed and engage customers and stakeholders in learning more about their water system.
 - ◆ Provide a way for the board and staff to listen to customers and stakeholders in advance of acting on rate study. Recommendations.
 - ◆ Employees received “brand ambassador training”.
 - ◆ Expanded customers’ understanding of services, proactive maintenance, and capital improvements.

● ● COMMUNICATIONS

Proactive Communication Promotes Successful Water Rate Increase

Leslie Payne



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Sweetwater Authority is a joint powers agency that provides public water service to approximately 189,000 people residing and working in National City, Calif., and the South Bay Irrigation District, which includes portions of the city of Chula Vista and most of the unincorporated community of Bonita in San Diego County. The authority is one of 24 member agencies of the San Diego County Water Authority.

With a diverse and abundant supply of local water resources, the authority has positioned itself as a regional leader. The authority is among the few regional water companies that sources 100% of its water from local facilities, importing no water to meet the normal water demand of its customers. Planning, innovation, and best management practices have kept rates for the authority’s customers among the lowest in the region.

In 2018, Sweetwater Authority conducted a rate study and proposed a new five-year rate plan that included a rate-stabilization fund to minimize large rate spikes. When the rate study was eventually adopted, the authority hadn’t raised rates since 2015, and it was the first time the agency was implementing a long-horizon rate structure.

To ensure that the public was informed of and on board with the new rates, the authority worked on a dynamic outreach campaign—the agency’s first attempt at this kind of effort. Public affairs staff developed a communications plan with the help of consulting firm Raftelis, which also conducted the rate study. The authority also hired SVPR Communications to assist with local media and community communications, including connecting with hard-to-reach bilingual communities.

Campaign Specifics
First, Sweetwater Authority worked with its staff and governing board to determine the campaign’s priorities.

A Different Approach
When faced with its first water rate increase since 2015, Sweetwater Authority in Chula Vista, Calif., recognized its community’s expectations and took a different approach to notifying its customers about the rate increase. The public may not always see the value in a rate increase, but integrating effective communications into a proposed rate increase can build community relationships that extend beyond the move to raise rates.

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EPA Communicating the Value of Water Services

- ◆ Environmental Protection Agency
- ◆ Source: [EPA Website](#)
- ◆ Outline for Communicating the Value of Water
 - ◆ Identify community's needs or issues through surveys, focus groups or other data-gathering techniques.
 - ◆ Develop a message and communicate it through campaigns or community engagement efforts including public meetings and events, social media, Web sites and software applications for mobile devices.
 - ◆ Continue to engage the community and adjust communication efforts based on changing needs and issues.

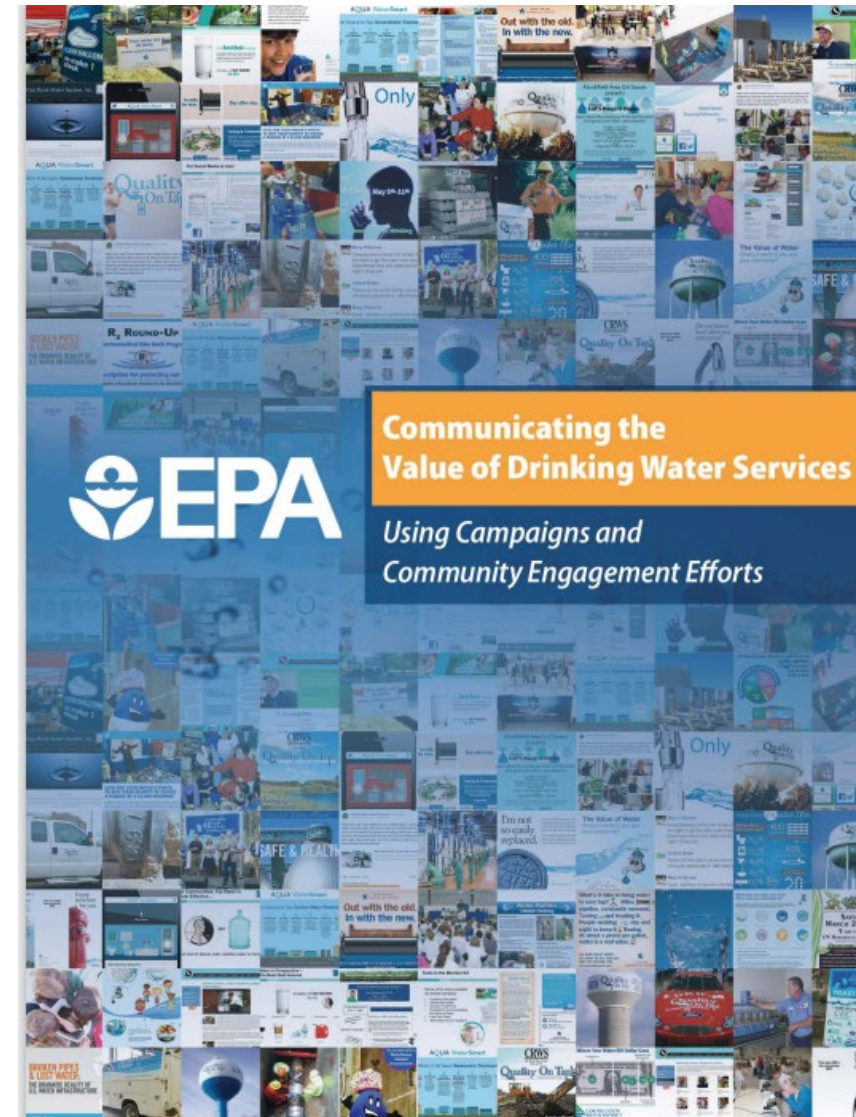


Table Discussion

- ◆ How can all of us can be more effective in communicating the needs of our systems.
 - ◆ What's working well?
 - ◆ What can we all do better?
 - ◆ What have you found to be effective in communicating the needs of your local system?
- ◆ Each table should be prepared to report out for a larger group discussion.

