

How To Communicate The Value Of Water – And Rate Hikes – To Customers

A champion of water investment shares four strategies for winning over customers to support both short-term and lasting utility initiatives.



By Radhika Fox

Water is a constant. It's a thread that weaves through our lives on a daily basis. But water utilities are evolving rapidly, and tomorrow's water utility is going to look very different from previous generations.

Historically, water and wastewater utilities were happy to be out of sight and out of mind. The incredible systems, which bring water to homes and businesses and then take it away and treat it, were built generations ago. They have served their communities well — and in most parts of the country, customers are intrinsically used to clean, safe, reliable water service. As a result, most Americans take our most precious resource for granted. And utilities were largely content with that arrangement. They could quietly go about their business, proud to do the work that keeps communities going.

However, external and internal factors are changing that arrangement — and utilities are changing with it. We have seen steadily declining federal investment in water infrastructure; now, 98 percent of water and wastewater projects are financed locally through revenue generated by water bills. Utilities are becoming creative in a number of ways: how they are financing projects, how they engage with their customers about the state of water systems, the need to invest, and how precious dollars are being spent.

The US Water Alliance convenes the Value of Water Coalition, which is focused on building public and political will for investment in sustainable water infrastructure and water resources. Through education and advocacy campaigns, strategic communications and media activities, high-impact

events, and publications, we are helping the nation understand that water is essential, invaluable, and in need of investment. We are sharing some of the best practices from the members of the Value of Water Coalition for communicating the value of our water infrastructure and the need for smart and responsible rate proposals.

Educate And Engage Customers About Their Water Systems

Utilities should constantly remind and educate customers about their systems, not just when a new rate proposal is on the table.

When customers understand the incredible and complicated systems that bring water to and from homes and businesses, they understand why investments need to be made. They feel pride in their water systems.

DC Water, for example, offers wildly popular public tours of its magnificent Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant. In 2015, more than 2,000 people toured the plant, and by January 2016, the tour wait list was already six months long. Bringing everyone

from school students to members of Congress through the plant is an opportunity to pull back the curtain and show — not just tell — people where the revenue generated from water bills goes. In Cleveland, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District took stakeholders and local press on a “Follow the Flow” tour during Infrastructure Week 2015 to showcase all the incredible steps water goes through from treatment to safe return to receiving waters.

Seek Open, Honest Feedback On Rate Proposals

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Annually the average U.S. family spends 2x as much on their cable bill as they do on their water bill.

Imagine a Day Without Water
#ValueWater



One of many infographics shared on social media during the Value of Water Coalition's "Imagine a Day Without Water" campaign

but it is better to be loud and proud about a rate proposal than lurking in the shadows. Utilities are actively and consistently engaging with community leaders, elected officials, and commissions to shape and advance the rate proposals needed to operate and invest in water infrastructure. Explaining that these systems are aging, the potential hazards of not investing, and the fact that utilities are prudent stewards of ratepayer dollars is essential. When the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission recently adopted its four-year rate proposal for water and wastewater rates, it was preceded by hundreds of meetings with stakeholder groups from the Bay to the ocean. From neighborhood councils to the Rotary Club, the San Francisco utility went out of its way to engage stakeholders and transparently acknowledge that the system had been really affordable, but the community needs to actively invest in it for future generations.

Activate The Business Community As Champions

When Atlanta's Department of Watershed Management wanted to communicate about the importance of creating a more secure water supply for the city, it was an economic argument that sealed the deal. Currently, the city only has a three-day emergency supply of water. If there were a water crisis upstream that shut down the flow of water into Atlanta, the city could lose \$100 million a day in economic activity. Atlanta has the busiest airport in the world and is home to major global corporations. Losing water would mean closing restaurants, hotels, and the airport. It would be a public safety and public health crisis, and it would be an economic catastrophe. But investing in a new reservoir that will hold a 30-day emergency supply of water will create a more secure water future and create more jobs.

That is why the business community stood with Atlanta in

support of the reservoir project. The Value of Water Coalition went to the reservoir site for "Imagine a Day Without Water" — a national education campaign to promote investment in water — and standing side-by-side with the Department of Watershed Management and Mayor Reed were business leaders who are building the Atlanta Falcons' new football stadium. Athletes and fans alike need water! Elected officials listened closely to business leaders. The message was clear in Atlanta: The reservoir was a worthwhile investment.

Make It A Dialogue With Your Customers

Communications is about having a conversation with customers that goes beyond simply informing them about the utility's needs. As customers are increasingly turning to online platforms and social media as primary channels of communication, water providers need to diversify their communication tools as well. For American Water, that has meant a significant increase in maintaining consistent, responsive, and robust social media presence. "The key is to tailor how you connect with your customers, understanding what kind of information they want from you and the context in which they want it," says Maureen Duffy, vice president of corporate communications and external affairs for American Water. "We want our customers to know we are working for them, helping to improve the systems, and striving to earn and keep their trust as their water services provider."

Value of Water Coalition members are leaning in to the challenges facing modern water utilities. By increasing efforts to educate and engage their communities, utilities are entering a new era that is no longer out of sight, out of mind. Tomorrow's water utilities should be at the center of the conversation for how to build strong, equitable, and sustainable communities. ■

About The Author



Radhika Fox is the CEO of the US Water Alliance, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to uniting people and policy for one water sustainability. Radhika also serves as director of the Value of Water Coalition, a collaboration of water agencies, business leaders, and national organizations dedicated to educating and inspiring people about how water is essential and invaluable and needs investment.