



Make Yourself Heard: Communication Strategies for Successful Rates Outreach

Designing Effective Campaigns to Win Public Opinion and Overcome Political Sensitivities By Janet Zimmerman

All water providers are confronted with the prospect of a rate increase at some point, but whether the proposed increase will be successfully passed and implemented is never a sure thing.

That's where outreach comes in. Effective communication—the way a rate change message is explained and presented—is the key to garnering public support and, subsequently, board approval.

The secret to a successful public education campaign? Customization and consistency.

Communication should be ongoing, transparent, and audience specific. It is an opportunity to build relationships with customers so they understand and support the district's goals.

The best rates outreach and communications plans are tailored to the unique demographics, preferences, geography, and history of the community. For instance, outreach for the city of Needles, population 5,000, a rural desert city on the eastern California border, would look different than that of Eastern Municipal Water District in Perris, California, the largest water provider in Riverside County with 142,000, mostly suburban, connections.

Water districts must be mindful of their constituencies and how certain types of outreach will be received.

A small, agricultural district, or an agency with a large segment of customers who are price sensitive, tend to prefer

materials that are simple, right down to the paper they are printed on. Other agencies are known for materials that are sophisticated and visually appealing, and they do well with a rate notice that is more highly designed.

Effective outreach, however, is about more than just a single rate notice. Districts should be issuing regular communications, which will help ensure that the rate approval process runs smoothly.

“That consistent communication is what builds a bank of goodwill in the community so when rates have to go up, customers already understand what their district does and what its assets are,” said Tom Coleman, general manager at Rowland Water District in Rowland Heights, California, on the eastern edge of Los Angeles County. “That happens slowly and over time, and only when you continually communicate.”

Communications Build Support

East Valley Water District in Highland, California, debuted an eight-page notice in 2015, in advance of proposed rate changes and a budget-based rate structure. In addition to legal language required under California's Proposition 218, which regulates property-related fees and charges, such as water service, the notice featured a unique tabbed layout, infographics, and photographs.

The District also formed a Rate Study Working Group



View of Rowland Heights, CA.

made up of 10 customers of varying backgrounds to gather input, gauge concerns and understand the need for additional education during the process, instead of after the fact, said Kelly Malloy, EVWD's public affairs/conservation manager.

"Because of the Rate Study Working Group, the comprehensive mailer and website content, we received a higher level of credibility during the process than if we had only done the bare minimum," Ms. Malloy said. "This situation could have been a very stressful interaction with our customers and instead it opened the door for future communications and made it a positive experience."

The utility followed up last year with a series of short videos explaining budget-based rates and other topics that drive consumption and affect bills, including supply sources, how to read a meter, and how to use a weather-based irrigation controller. The videos were part of East Valley's broader conversation with customers about what the district is doing and why.

Using a Personal Touch

Tom Coleman and his crew at Rowland Water District take a personalized approach to rates outreach.

It is not unusual to see a board member engaging with customers at a local coordinating council meeting or the entire district staff riding a float for the annual Buckboard Days parade and then staffing a booth and answering the public's questions.

"I think the personal touch helps. I think the people who do engage with Rowland Water District know we're very approachable and accommodating," Mr. Coleman said.

As an example, a married couple who volunteer

throughout the community, attend water district meetings, and sit on the school board, reached out to get a better understanding of proposed rates. Mr. Coleman and his staff sat down with them for an hour.

"If you can get community leaders to be supportive, then they're out there helping you with that messaging. They are your best advocates," he said.

"The district, which has 13,500 connections, emphasizes transparency and accessibility by using bill inserts, posting information to the district's website, and encouraging customers to speak to district representatives personally," said Rose Perea, director of administrative services.

Mr. Coleman has worked hard to change the perception that ratepayers do not have a say in the rate-setting process. "When we make ourselves available, when we're willing to sit down and do those one-on-ones, it makes a difference. For Rowland, if you want an audience with your general manager, he's willing to sit down with you. Not every agency can give that level of customer service, but it matters," he said.

Encouraging Participation

When Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District (EVMWD) proposed moving from five rate tiers to four, the agency also wanted to upgrade from a letter-style notice to a larger brochure-style piece with color and infographics. The extra space allowed for the addition of information on district programs such as rebates, rate assistance, and state-mandated conservation requirements during the drought.

The district knew from formal and informal polling data that most of its customers prefer to receive information



John Mura, general manager of East Valley Water District, engages members of the community about the value of the district's services.

by direct mail. “When they pulled it out of the mailbox, it was something they would notice,” said Bonnie Woodrome, EVMWD’s community affairs supervisor. “This was the right style piece to capture the attention of our customers, to ensure that they would be aware of the rate proposal well ahead of time and be able to participate in the process.”

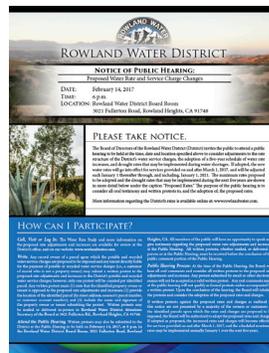
The district’s outreach didn’t stop there. EVMWD also sent eblasts, used social media and its smartphone app, attended community meetings, and published information in its quarterly Water Log newsletter.

“We use many different channels because we have audiences in different places,” Ms. Woodrome said. “If we always have the information available, then we’re reaching them to the best of our abilities.”

Another important tool, she said, was a bill estimator



Direct mail materials inviting the district’s customers to participate in the rates hearing process.



on the EVMWD website, so customers can get an idea of how the new rates would affect them. Combined with training for the customer service department, which is often customers’ first stop with questions, Ms. Woodrome said the effort was a homerun.

EVMWD was heaped with praise for its Prop 218 Public Hearing Notice, which won awards from the California

Association of Public Information Officials and Public Relations Society of American Inland Empire Chapter.

When your rates outreach campaign wins awards for customer engagement, you are on the right track. **M**

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