Social Media for Water Utilities

Water Research Foundation Project #4638
May 4, 2017
POLL QUESTION

Which of the following best describes how your utility handles social media?

a) We have accounts that we control
b) The City/County handles social media for us
c) We don’t have any social media at all
Social Media Project Background

“the projected growth in social media ... will be the most significant trend affecting information technology during the next 10 years”

– *Forecasting the Future: Progress, Change, and Predictions in the Water Sector* (WRF #4232, 2012)

– Recommends that utilities “embrace new communication channels to proactively control public perception.”

• Importance of social media for water utilities also underlined in *Steering Innovation in Water Utility Finance and Management* (WRF #4506, 2013)

– Describes several strategies and tactics that utilities have used to respond to the explosion of social media
Project Need

• Benefits of social media engagement appear substantial, but are difficult to quantify
• Social media can introduce new challenges, unintended consequences, and costs and is evolving rapidly, making it challenging to keep up
• Subscribing utilities asked for a project that would identify the costs, opportunities, barriers, strategies, and tools for effective engagement in social media so that:
  1. utility leadership and decision-makers can make the business case for digital engagement and
  2. communication teams can determine how best to fit digital engagement in their overall communication strategy
Questions

• What social media services are the most suitable for water utilities?
• How much staff time does a utility need to commit to social media to get a worthwhile result?
• How much does it cost?
• What policies and procedures should a utility have in place before going into social media?
• What are best practices for posting, tweeting, sharing, etc?
• How can utilities deal with trolls?
• What tools and resources are available?
• Do the benefits outweigh the risks and costs?
Eric Eckl founded Water Words That Work LLC as a marketing and public relations firm for nature protection and pollution control organizations.

Since 2009, assisted more than 200 conservation organizations, including the National Park Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts, the Ogeechee Riverkeeper, and many others.

Past work includes fundraising, media relations, and publishing activities.

Past employers include Beaconfire Consulting, American Rivers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the White House Council on Environmental Quality.
AGENDA

- Introductions
- Top Takeaways
- Our Top Recommendations
- Research Deliverables
- Top Takeaways Revisited
- Top Recommendations Revisited
- Q & A pause
- Resource list and links (subscriber-only vs public)
- Contact information, including waterrf.org URL and social media handles
The Project Team

Laura Ganus  
Project Manager

Avia Huisman  
Literature Review

Chandra Brown  
Case Studies

Erika Howder  
Quality Assurance

Edwin Alferez  
Data Entry
The Project Team

Project Technical Advisory Committee
• John Lisle, District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority
• Andy Le, District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority
• Girma Moges, New York City Department of Environmental Protection
• John Gonzalez, Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District
• Leah Williams, New York City Department of Environmental Protection

Utility Partners
• Peter Eschbach, American Water, Northeast Division
• Andrew Bliss, Capital Region Water
• Laura Walker, City of Savannah Public Works & Resources Bureau
• Jennifer Kaiser, Vallejo Flood & Wastewater District
• Kenneth Klipstein, New Jersey Water Supply Authority
Our Top Takeaways

1. A handful of utilities are demonstrating the potential of social media for the industry
2. However, only a small minority of utilities are using social media at all
3. Even water utilities that do use social media are only connecting with a fraction of the population they serve
4. Most utilities aren’t giving customers what they want on social media
5. With a few exceptions, utilities aren’t taking advantage of social media to make the case for rate increases
Our Top Recommendations

1. Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look.
2. Utilities should think through their goals and develop some policies and guidelines before they launch their official profiles.
3. Utilities should expect to commit between 10 and 80 hours of staff time per week, and also budget for useful tools and related expenses.
4. Utilities should make a conscious effort to share content that is interesting and “socialize” their information.
5. Utilities should reconsider their objections to paid advertising, especially during crisis situations.
Research Deliverable #1: Customer Survey

We surveyed 400 Facebook users about their relationship with their water utility.

(Available to WRF subscribers only)
Research Deliverable 
#2: Benchmarking

We examined the social media practices of 60 water, wastewater, and stormwater utilities from all across the country.

(Available to WRF subscribers only)
We prepared a 65-page literature review with over 90 citations from peer reviewed, grey, and popular literature.

(Available to WRF subscribers only)
Research Deliverable # 4: Case Studies

We prepared eight case studies to document how utilities are integrating social media into their operations

(Available to WRF subscribers only)
Research Deliverable # 5: Executive Briefing

We synthesized and interpreted all other findings, and made recommendations for utilities that are just getting started

(Publicly available)
Research Deliverable # 6: “Getting Started” FAQ

An FAQ document, also aimed at utilities considering taking the plunge for the very time

(Subscribers only)
Research Deliverable # 7: Posting Skills Checklist

A simple online tool that helps utilities prepare compelling and “social” content for Facebook and Twitter

(Publicly available)
Top Takeaway #1:
A handful of utilities are demonstrating the potential of social media for the industry

SF Water, Power, Sewer (SFPUC) January 17

"Drain Drain Go Away" & "A Boy Named Sewer" look like they are in very responsible hands. TY Stacy! #Adoptadrain adoptadrain.sfwater.org

My Stacy cleaning out one of our adopted drains last night. Yes, we're those people now. Go to https://adoptadrain.sfwater.org/ to adopt a drain in your neighborhood! It's not just free, the SF Water Power Sewer (SFPUC) will also give you a fancy safety vest... and you get to feel good about helping our beautiful little city. Our adopted drains are called "Drain Drain Go Away" and a "A Boy Named Sewer"

Riverside Public Utilities January 23

Incredible before/after pics of sinkhole from blown fire hydrant at Linden and Chicago. Thanks to #RPU crews who worked through the night!
Top Takeaway #1:
A handful of utilities are demonstrating the potential of social media for the industry
Top Takeaway #2:

However, only a small minority of utilities are using social media at all.
Top Takeaway #2:
However, only a small minority of utilities are using social media at all.
Top Takeaway #3:

Even water utilities that do use social media are only connecting with a fraction of the population they serve.
**Top Takeaway #4:**

Most utilities aren’t giving customers what they want on social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Updates on service disruptions and outages</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updates on water and sewer line construction and repairs in your neighborhood</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water conservation and pollution prevention tips, offers, and incentives</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tips for preventing clogged pipes and sewage backups in your home</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updates on your water utility’s environmental accomplishments</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water utility public events, such as festivals and volunteer activities</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility announcements: awards received, new hires, etc.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top Takeaway #4:
Most utilities aren’t giving customers what they want on social media

- 33% Public Events
- 14% Utility announcements: awards received, new hires, etc.
- 13% How the UTILITY protects the environment
- 11% Construction and repair updates
- 10% Plumbing information or help for customers
- 9% Water service problem or update
- 8% How CUSTOMERS can protect the environment
- 2% Rates or bill information
Top Takeaway #5:
With a few exceptions, utilities aren’t taking advantage of social media to make the case for rate increases.
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With a few exceptions, utilities aren’t taking advantage of social media to make the case for rate increases.
Top Recommendation #1:
Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look

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79% of online adults (68% of all Americans) use Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of online adults who use Facebook</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All online adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school degree or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30K/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30K-$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$74,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.
“Social Media Update 2016”
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Top Recommendation #1:
Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look.

Facebook and Twitter provide tools to manage “trolls”
Top Recommendation #1:
Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look

For example, you can turn this rating and comment feature off.

(You’re welcome!)
Top Recommendation #1: Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look

Why customers would connect:

- "To stay connected and informed to problems that may affect my area"
- "...to get latest updates on stoppages, upgrades, construction, rates, etc"
- "I would connect with my water company on social media to get updates on outages and flushing the systems"
Top Recommendation #1:
Utilities that are not currently using social media should take another look

- Complete information about the extent and demographic use of social media can be found in the Literature Review Report
- Survey findings about what water utility customers expect from their water utility on social media can be found in the Survey Results Report
- Information about how to deal with “trolls” can be found in the Getting Started FAQ
Top Recommendation #2:
Utilities should think through their goals and develop some policies and guidelines before they launch their official profiles.
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Utilities should think through their goals and develop some policies and guidelines before they launch their official profiles.

IN THE HEADLINES:

Maryland school district worker fired after correcting student’s spelling in a tweet

- Tara Bahrampur, The Washington Post
  January 16, 2017

Staff Member terminated after tweet about misspelling goes viral

- Katie Misuraca, Your4State.com
  January 15, 2017
Top Recommendation #2:
Utilities should think through their goals and develop some policies and guidelines before they launch their official profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>% Reporting They Have a Formal Social Media Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>240 individuals from the banking, insurance, manufacturing, and consulting industries</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155 cities</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top Recommendation #2:
Utilities should think through their goals and develop some policies and guidelines before they launch their official profiles

• Highlights from various institutions’ social media policies and a few complete social media policies can be found in the Literature Review Report
Top Recommendation #3:
Utilities should expect to commit between 10 and 80 hours of staff time per week, and also budget for useful tools and related expenses.

Source: Stelzner 2015
Top Recommendation #3:
Utilities should expect to commit between 10 and 80 hours of staff time per week, and also budget for useful tools and related expenses

- A sample social media weekly/monthly/quarterly/annual workplan can be found in the Executive Briefing
- Examples of how other utilities have structured, staffed, and budgeted their social media operations can be found in the Case Studies Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Time Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the outset</td>
<td>Set goals for what the utility will attempt to accomplish on social media&lt;br&gt;Develop employee policies and public use policies&lt;br&gt;Update or create a crisis communication plan to include social media&lt;br&gt;Set up social media accounts and carefully adjust settings&lt;br&gt;Promote social media accounts on websites, email newsletter, and elsewhere&lt;br&gt;Connect to local elected officials, board members, journalists, and other community leaders&lt;br&gt;Research popular community hashtags and relevant groups&lt;br&gt;Set up social media monitoring and Google Alerts</td>
<td>30-50 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Review overnight events to determine if there were any service interruptions, water main breaks, or other events that require follow-up&lt;br&gt;Review the day's field work orders to anticipate likely areas of construction or traffic interruption&lt;br&gt;Respond to incoming social media messages, or refocus them to customer service&lt;br&gt;Scan for mentions of the utility across the internet&lt;br&gt;Identify suitable content from others to like</td>
<td>1 to 2 hours per day per social media account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Post 1-2 times on Twitter&lt;br&gt;Post 1-2 times on Facebook&lt;br&gt;Create one long form blog post (1000+ words)&lt;br&gt;Monitor social media attention to partners and other community institutions&lt;br&gt;Review analytics of the utility’s Facebook and Twitter accounts&lt;br&gt;Review results with direct supervisors</td>
<td>2 to 3 hours per week per social media account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td>Review progress toward goals; adjust goals if necessary&lt;br&gt;Present update to senior management/broad of directors&lt;br&gt;Review upcoming quarter’s event calendar and potential crisis situations (flood, blizzards, etc.)</td>
<td>5-10 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>Review progress toward goals in the past year&lt;br&gt;Set goals for the coming year&lt;br&gt;Review staffing arrangements and adjust if necessary&lt;br&gt;Review utility policies and guidelines, recommend adjustments if necessary</td>
<td>5-10 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top Recommendation #4:
Utilities should make a conscious effort to share content that is interesting and “socialize” their information.
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Utilities should make a conscious effort to share content that is interesting and “socialize” their information

- Extensive guidance on how utilities can “socialize” their content can be found in the Executive Briefing
- Utility staff are welcome to use the free Posting Skills Checklist tool until they feel comfortable with all their options
Top Recommendation #5:
Utilities should reconsider their objections to paid advertising, especially during crisis situations.
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Utilities should reconsider their objections to paid advertising, especially during crisis situations.

Utilities should consider boosting posts, or sponsoring tweets, at least during crisis, because even the most successful ones only reach very small audiences otherwise.
Top Recommendation #5:
Utilities should reconsider their objections to paid advertising, especially during crisis situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Average Cost to Reach 1,000</th>
<th>Average # of Clicks to Website</th>
<th>Average Cost Per Click to Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>$7.19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27 cents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>$9 to $11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25 to 30 cents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://adespresso.com/academy/blog/facebook-ads-cost/
Top Recommendation #5:
Utilities should reconsider their objections to paid advertising, especially during crisis situations

- Documentation of the limited reach of most utilities’ social media accounts can be found in the Benchmarks Report.
- Industry benchmarks on results to expect and common cost ranges can be found in the Executive Briefing.
The Posting Skills Checklist

A free tool you can use to sharpen your skills at preparing “social” content. It’s like a pair of training wheels - it’s for beginners and after a while you won’t need it.
The tool provides some templates for common topics, or you can write a post or tweet from scratch.
The Posting Skills Checklist

There is a short video that explains each best practice.

Links and Landing Pages

Does your content contain a link? *

- Yes, it links to a landing page where we can collect their email addresses
- Yes, it links to a landing page, but we can't collect their email address there
- Yes, it links to a website that we don't own
- No, it doesn't contain a link anywhere
The Posting Skills Checklist

At the end, you get a score!
The Posting Skills Checklist

Questions & Answers

Please submit your questions using the chatbox.
Resources

• Benchmarking (subscriber-only)
• Customer Survey (subscriber-only)
• Literature Review (subscriber-only)
• Executive Briefing (public)
• Case Studies (subscriber-only)
• Getting Started FAQ (subscriber-only)
• Posting Skills Checklist Tool (public)
Contact Information

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Thank You!

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For more information visit: www.waterrf.org