Handling Wastewater Crisis Communications in The Instant Information Age

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Background

- National news writer, editor & producer
- Planning Editor, WUSA9, Washington, DC
- 12+ Years as Media Relations Director
- 3+ Years: Public Affairs UC & Lead Spokesperson
- Director, Customer Relations & Communications
- 4+ Years: Chief Communications Officer
- Founded WaterPIO
MY ONE THING...

Become & STAY
THE GO-TO source
for information about
your services
Your customers receive the news they want WITHOUT having to ask for it.

They expect timely information, especially about services they rely on AND pay for.

Water/wastewater utilities must meet these higher expectations. Especially during a crisis.
Old Days, Old Ways are OVER

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• Old scar tissue: “The media only cares about controversy.”
• Old mindset: “Out of sight, out of mind? Fine by me.”
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Thanks to social media, those days are OVER.
- Stick with OLD mindset? Russian Roulette with reputation.
- Not talking days or weeks of damage. Talking YEARS.
Crisis Prep: Proactive COMMS 1st

- You prepare for crisis situations with regular outreach & information
- Consistent, proactive communications with your customers builds trust. That trust is VITAL when water/sewer incidents make headlines.
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PROOF: J.D. Power Water Customer Surveys

Scores were 15 to 25% higher when customers remembered proactive communications. More COMMS? Better results.

Media impact? WQA: In 2015, 27% of customers said they learned about water utility issues from news media.
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  - Scores were 15 to 25% higher when customers remembered proactive communications. More COMMS? Better results.
- Media impact? WQA: In 2015, 27% of customers said they learned about water utility issues from news media. 2017? 43%. Why? FLINT.
Crisis Prep: Proper Planning

• Treat COMMS like any other operation. Have a crisis COMMS plan.
  • Structure for proper internal & public release of information
  • Ensures customers & key stakeholders get the best information as quickly as possible
  • Prevents information gaps
  • Reduces chances for confusion & anger
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  • Protects public safety, especially critical customers
  • Uses pre-written materials to cut down on errors
  • Sets approval processes for quality control
  • Gives guidelines for media access, social media interaction
  • Empowers employees to provide information
The Crisis COMMS Plan

• Components of a Crisis Communications Plan *(Part of utility emergency management plan)*
  • Breaks down significant water, wastewater emergencies
  • Based on best practices. Uses lessons learned by staff.
  • Assigns staff into proper roles. Multiple levels, stages.
  • Use of National Incident Management System (NIMS)?
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  - Use of National Incident Management System (NIMS)?
  - Plan details required crisis communications processes
  - Plan directs customer communications, media response
  - Specifically addresses contact with critical customers
  - Provides templated materials. Sets approval process for quality control.
The Crisis COMMS Plan

• Key Areas of Focus
    • Good definition: “Customers or connections critical to public health & safety OR reliance on services for economic resiliency.”
    • Should never have to wonder what is going on
    • Public health could be placed at risk due to lack of communication
    • Failure creates significant distraction. Can harm entire utility response.
    • If you fail w/critical customers, entire response is called into question
• **Key Areas of Focus for SSOs**
  
  • Other "quality of life" customers, in addition to everyday customers
    • Environmentally sensitive areas. Marinas. Water-centric/located businesses.
  
  • **Key stakeholders**
    • Government, first responder communications staff. Riverkeepers.
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  • Mass media outlets
    • Newspaper editors & beat reporters. TV anchors, reporters, & radio hosts.
  • Social media
    • Influencers on Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor, Instagram
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- Employees. Employees. Employees.
  - You’re a TEAM. They can serve as important eyes and ears.
The Crisis COMMS Plan

- **Successful structure**
  - Contains guidelines for information gathering
    - How you handle reports from field, employees, key stakeholders, customers
    - Vetting process for rapid but ACCURATE response
  - Provides process for messaging & information release
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  • Provides process for messaging & information release
    • What? Templates with customization for situation
    • When? Timing for initial response & regular response
    • Where? On scene, at utility offices, in emergency ops centers
    • How? Press releases/interviews, social media content, web content
    • By whom? Spokespeople. Top management. CUSTOMER SERVICE.

• DRILL. DRILL. DRILL. Utility workshops, tabletops, full-scale exercises.
The Crisis: Hewlett’s Creek SSO

- Major pump station failed during storm. 1 of 29 to lose power.
- 500,000-gallon spill. Just after Consent Decree rollout.
- Largest spill in 7 years. Same pump station.
- Heart of populated area. Major roadway during rush hour.
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- Heart of populated area. Major roadway during rush hour.
- Everything clearly visible, including entry into creek
- All local TV on scene with live coverage
- Early cause: Lightning strike knocked out SCADA, power
- Scrammed station’s system. Caused delayed response.
Activated SSO part of Crisis Communications Plan:

- Promotes/manages open utility communications. Internal & external.
- Keeps common operating picture
- Remains cognizant event milestones (SSO stoppage, testing process)
- Coordinates, executes consistent, clear communications

For Major SSOs:

- Mass media releases/interviews/Editorial Board call/Op-Ed submission
- Customer service/web messages
- Key stakeholder phone calls/briefings
- Social media posts/response, especially for rumor control
Immediate Crisis Response

- Failure mirrored Utility’s workshops, tabletop trainings
- COMMS joined field crews on scene. Got there just ahead of press.
- “Public street,” but with safety concerns. Ability to manage press.
- Briefed press as they arrived. “Minded” them to get video.
- Individual live shots/taped-to-live interviews. (Coin flip.)
- Constant back-and-forth through first 24 hours
- Social media monitored. Responses given with speed, clarity.
Immediate Crisis Response

• Social Media
  • Goals: Provide public with information AND blow up misinformation
  • 1st Reax: *What happened? How could this happen? You screwed up.*
  • SM Posters: Two categories – “Always Angry” & “Looking for Info”
  • Quickly implemented COMMS plan. Posted from the scene.
  • Reported news/messaging quickly, clearly, constantly
  • Mirrored news update timing. “Always Angry” never given an info gap.
  • Employees monitored for misinformation, aided rapid response
    *(Especially Facebook & Nextdoor)*
COMMS During the Crisis

• Messages for everyone, repeated every opportunity:
  • SSO: Unique, unfortunate. Lightning strike rare, harmed response.
  • Staff mobilized, stay on scene round clock to lessen environmental impact
  • Multi-day response. SSO ended in hours. Our work continues for days.
  • No advisories required (heavy dilution) but testing continues to ensure safety
  • Test results show significant improvement every day
  • Outlier. Upgrades – funded by rate increases – cut sewage spilled 90%.
  • Investigation ongoing. Will be publicly released, available online.
  • Meantime, utility always here to answer questions
COMMS After the Crisis

• After first 24 hours:
  • **Waterways always improve post-SSO. Keep informing the public.**
    • Don’t break away early. Post-SSO updates assure the public.
    • Focused on test results showing improving conditions in the creek
  • Planned transparency. Information released like clockwork.
  • Monitored, responded to social media
  • Provided video/photos to show site improvement
  • Worked w/editorial page editor to shape editorial
COMMS After the Crisis

- Next month, through next board meeting:
  - Visited site to shoot photos, provide video
  - Provided regular updates on status of the river, sampling results
  - Talked about the investigation as a positive
  - Produced investigation report for public consumption, not engineers.
  - Worked with environmental influencers
  - Continuous use of social media with the general public
CFPUA reduces sewage spills

More than 440K gallons of wastewater spilled during sewer overflow

Quick response limits volume of overflow from sewer spill

CFPUA releases test results for Hewletts Creek overflow

OUR VIEW: Why does Wilmington rarely have sewer spills now?

Editorial - CFPUA work is paying off
SUMMARY

• Time to prepare is NOW before a crisis hits. Evaluate, plan, & drill.
• Boost regular communications about your services. Build public trust.
• Treat COMMS like any other operation. Plan benefits ALL stakeholders.
• Crisis hits: Rely on the plan. Quickly get info out. Cover every angle.
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• Crisis hits: Rely on the plan. Quickly get info out. Cover every angle.
• Remember critical customers. Involve Customer Service, employees.
• Take advantage of social media. Blow up misinformation, weaken anger.
• SSOs provide opportunities. Use your strengths. Address weaknesses.
• Keep communicating. Situation ALWAYS improves. Can GAIN respect.
Become & **STAY**
THE GO-TO source
for information about
your services