

Creating Water Quality Confidence

Building a Water Quality Track Record

Introduction

The challenge of creating water quality confidence when proposing recycled water for potable uses fundamentally involves getting the audience to substitute trust in the water source with trust in the utility. This is not a trivial task given people's positive feelings toward "mountain spring water" and people's perceptions of tap water and government. The emergence of home water treatment products and advertising makes this task more difficult. We can tackle the problem if we start by remembering that municipal water is a tremendously valuable product from both a reliability and quality perspective. This does not mean utilities don't need to improve.

The sample communication and guidance tool for creating water quality confidence helps utilities create *content and messages* that will build trust. This tool addresses building a track record (actions and behavior over time) that demonstrates leadership and a strong commitment to water quality. Track record is important for several reasons, including the following:

The Consumer's Experience – The vast majority of people have some experience with drinking tap water. They may not think that it tastes great, but they will have ingested it many times without ever feeling badly or getting sick. This experience (or track record) is probably more relevant and powerful than any science or data shared by the utility. It is also why the idea of improvement is an important and powerful idea. In the consumer's mind, if the water is improving, it means their past experience is relevant. Degradation in water quality voids their experience, which is cause for concern.

Science and Data - It is virtually impossible for the average person to understand or appreciate the science behind water quality management. This is why the EPA mandated Consumer Confidence Report is very limited when it comes to fostering consumer confidence. Given this, an interested consumer *will find ways* to trust the utility, or not, without having to earn a degree in chemistry or public health. They do this by looking for evidence of integrity, and behaviors that make common sense. This document addresses integrity, and defines what makes sense to the average person when it comes to managing water quality.

Communicating Water Quality Values, Ethics

How does the utility demonstrate integrity? It does so by communicating the standards or values that drive utility activities, decisions, and investments and then demonstrating its commitment to these standards through its behavior. Saying that you are committed to "integrity" does not demonstrate it, and arguably has little benefit when striving to increase trust.

Besides complying with regulations, describing water quality standards that are meaningful to the average person can seem difficult. Even regulatory compliance is not very meaningful, or powerful. However, there are some simple standards or ideas that are meaningful, and will improve the relationship between the utility and interested consumers.

Improvement – As discussed above, a commitment to improvement allows a person's experience with the water to be valid. Perceived degradation voids their experience and not surprisingly creates concerns. This is a significant factor when proposing recycled water for potable or other uses. The perception is that a degraded source creates a greater risk for having a degraded product, requiring a more competent and diligent utility. A commitment to improvement helps to address this concern if it is combined with actions that clearly improve the water. Also, suggesting that you do not need to improve will be perceived as arrogant, and is not consistent with the consumer's experience with private sector companies, who are constantly "encouraged" to improve by their competitors.

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Increasing Knowledge - This commitment shows that the utility appreciates that there are risks and unknowns, which demonstrates that utility personnel are connected to reality, not their scientific egos. It also supports the “improvement” commitment. Improvement begins with increasing knowledge and awareness.

Conservatism - Again, there are risks and unknowns, which mean that some measure of conservatism is warranted and will be expected by consumers.

Diligence - Managing water quality, especially in a large municipal environment, is a complex task. People will appreciate that it takes diligence to ensure that the water purification processes are always functioning properly, and to ensure that the water quality is acceptable throughout the distribution system.

The following paragraphs present a few examples of actions that can increase confidence. However, any action that reinforces the ideas of improvement, increasing knowledge, conservatism, and diligence will improve perceptions and increase trust.

Water Quality Monitoring, Testing

Water testing can be a vehicle for demonstrating a strong water quality ethic. Monitoring programs that test for more contaminants than required by regulations demonstrate a commitment to increasing knowledge, improvement, and conservatism. A monitoring program that is impressive in terms of number of tests and testing locations in the distribution system communicates diligence. Common criticisms of water utilities are that they focus on water quality in the treatment plant, they do not know the water quality entering a specific customer’s home, and they don’t treat customers as individuals. Any actions that address these issues will build trust, especially helping concerned customers assess their in-home water quality.

Communication

The important communication issue is this. The utility needs to establish itself as *the trusted source of information* related to water quality. This means that the media or anyone else seeking information about water quality issues comes to the utility first. It also means that people can count on the utility to inform them about important issues, before they read about them in the newspapers. Meeting regulations related to customer notification will rarely be sufficient to build trust. The utility needs to communicate meaningfully about important issues even when not required to do so. For example, let’s say that based on statistical sampling a certain percentage of homes in a community are believed to have lead levels above the EPA standard, but this *percentage* is still below EPA regulations for the utility to be in overall compliance. The regulations do not require that the utility identify all of the homes that exceed the standard, and by how much they exceed the standard. The utility is also not required to *make sure* that the residents who have elevated lead levels know they have a problem. What should the utility communicate and to whom? In this case, just complying with regulations won’t pass muster if the desire is to build trust and create water quality confidence. Also, meeting regulations would certainly not be categorized as treating customers like individuals.

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Emergency/Event Response

The utility must view its response to water quality problems or negative events as a way to increase trust. This is not to say that having an event is a good thing. However, it is well known that working through problems together can result in greater trust. Why is this so? For utilities, the reason is that the problem or event stimulates community interest in water quality and the actions of the utility. From the utility's perspective, it creates an opportunity to form deeper relationships with interested parties and key stakeholders. The utility can take advantage of this opportunity if it chooses to respond aggressively and with conservatism, openness and diligence. Being secretive or defensive will only make the situation worse.

Watershed Water Quality Monitoring

Looking for and resolving watershed quality issues can build confidence. Being branded as a protector of the watershed is a positive brand. It allows the utility to go after sources of pollution, and is a cost effective way to maintain or improve water quality. It is also very consistent with the ideas of increasing knowledge and diligence. We have talked about replacing trust in the water source with trust in the utility. Watershed monitoring and source water protection will not create confusion if they are presented in the proper context. They are actions and investments *made by the utility* to create the best return on investment for the community.

Industry Leadership

It is natural for utilities that have highly competent staff members to seek accolades from within the industry. Given the nature of the water business, accolades *from the community* are not generally forthcoming. In private-sector businesses, the organizational ego is satisfied through sales growth, increased customer satisfaction, and increased market share. Industry leadership by a water utility can do more than feed the corporate ego and improve employee moral. It can help increase trust and confidence if the leadership relates to increasing knowledge, diligence or conservatism. However, it is important to keep in mind that value is determined by appropriate investment and service to customers, not applause from colleagues. If they are doing their job, governing boards will be focused on value and return on investment.