

Just Add Water

Addressing industry needs
via rural sector
public relations efforts

Not too long ago, areas of congregated population centers—or cities, towns and rural water districts, as we refer to them today—made strategic long-term decisions to provide essential services to help their populace grow and prosper. With the focus that was initiated many generations ago, our forefathers have pioneered a way of life that we still covet, expect and even take for granted.



By James Gammill

Water and wastewater infrastructure systems were added to provide for the overall health and convenience of the residents of these communities. The simple concept of “build it and they will come” has been the staple of growing communities throughout the country. With the proper and adequate infrastructure, communities can attract new business, which in turn brings more people, which in turn brings more revenues, which in turn keeps the loop in perpetual motion—ideally.

The purpose of writing this article is not to give a history lesson, but to point out the importance of taking action now to help prevent a crisis in the future. The infrastructure of our existing water and wastewater systems, our aging workforce and the need for better public relations to help educate the general populace need to be taken seriously.

Infrastructure

As with anything new, infrastructure will need to be maintained in order to remain in proper working condition and of course, will need to be replaced over time. U.S. infrastructure systems are in dire need of replacing or upgrading, not just to meet the demands of today, but to account for the needs of tomorrow. The business of providing

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essential services is by no means a free endeavor. Public utilities are and should be run as a business for the benefit of those they serve. The Oklahoma Water Resources Board estimates that the state of Oklahoma will need \$5.4 billion in water and wastewater infrastructure over the next 20 years.

As with most businesses, services are provided to the end user for a fee. That means the citizens of these communities will ultimately be responsible for repaying

the loans and bonds that are issued to cover future debt requests. Consumers today only know that water comes from the tap—turn the knob, and out comes water. The general public does not realize what it takes to get to that point. The days of water being considered a free commodity are coming to an end.

Water utilities from all across the nation are seeing their infrastructure systems come to the end of their useful life spans. Keeping up with projected population growth and meeting the ever-increasing federal regulations being placed on water and wastewater systems are additional burdens on public utilities. The need exists for long-range planning in the areas of supply and demand as well as strategies for remaining financially viable while affording to accomplish this over time. This is a task that needs to be addressed now for the benefit of future generations.

Workforce

Recent trends are showing signs of an aging workforce that will be looking to retirement in the coming years. Replacing and training a new generation of replacements will be a daunting task that systems will be faced with in the near future. The operators of water and wastewater systems are highly skilled professionals who undergo specialized training for licensing purposes and must meet federally mandated continuing education requirements. These operators are heroes in their own right and the first line of defense in protecting overall public health.


This specialized field requires dedicated individuals who are willing to take on enormous responsibility and work all hours until a job is done. Once qualified individuals are employed, it is the employer's duty to consider wage scales and benefits packages that are comparable to the private sector. Finding individuals who would consider this type of career will require the leaders of today to reach out and inspire our next generation of public servants.



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Education

Public relations (PR) are essential to help educate and provide valuable insight to the general public as to what it actually takes to provide potable water. Education enhances people's ability to make informed decisions. The process of providing this information, however, has become somewhat lax over time. Taking that first step toward developing local PR efforts will help the industry achieve education goals.

Some of the water and wastewater system PR campaigns around the country are an encouraging sign. The New York Rural Water Association has developed a DVD and a brochure to help educate elected officials and educational institutions on the importance of inspiring a new generation of water professionals. The Alliance of Indiana Rural Water invited a local Cub Scout pack to its conference to tour the exhibit hall and learn from a hands-on point of view about what really takes place in the water industry. The National Rural Water Association has been promoting its ad campaign of "Quality on Tap, Our Commitment Our Profession," which can be seen on all kinds of promotional items, equipment, vehicles and water towers. The Oklahoma Rural Water Association has been promoting a PR campaign designed to bring awareness to the industry. It is titled "Just Add Water ... See What Develops."

More information on all of these initiatives can be viewed on each organization's website. While all of these efforts differ in some ways, all should be applauded for trying to make a difference. These are the types of efforts that we need to see throughout the industry.

Everyone can all pitch in and do his or her part by becoming involved with a local water or wastewater organization. Encourage the general public to attend local meetings and get to know what water providers are doing on their behalf. This help-us-help-you approach will benefit our generation and those yet to come. **WWD**

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