

# Communicating With Customers

Improving conversations between water utilities & water users post-Flint crisis

Interview compiled by Sara Samovalov



Robin Gilthorpe leads the WaterSmart team in improving water use and operational efficiency for municipal and investor-owned water utilities globally. He has more than 20 years of experience in leveraging technology to solve global problems. Prior to WaterSmart, Gilthorpe was CEO of Terracotta Inc., a big data software provider. He joined Terracotta from TIBCO Software Inc., an analytics and infrastructure software company. He also served on the boards of Software AG and DataSynapse Inc. He can be reached at 415.366.8622.

**A**s the Flint, Mich., water crisis continues, the relationship between water utilities and their customers has been thrust into the national spotlight. W&WD Associate Editor Sara Samovalov spoke with Robin Gilthorpe, CEO of WaterSmart, about how utilities can ensure that customers are properly informed and educated about their water.

**Sara Samovalov: What can the situation in Flint teach water utilities about establishing and maintaining trust with their customers?**

**Robin Gilthorpe:** It's hard for water utilities to establish that trust. It has not historically been their practice to communicate on a regular basis, with context, other than, "This is how much you used," and, "This is how much you owe us." So it's no surprise that customers don't spend a lot of time thinking about what it takes to get that water to them. Part of this is a cultural thing—the utilities have been rewarded for focusing on the physical science of extracting and transporting and treating that water, so they tend to be dominated by people who have expertise in engineering. It's very difficult for them culturally, organizationally and skills-wise to engage in that conversation. And that conversation is what's essential for establishing trust.

**Samovalov: What are some best practices when it comes to communicating with customers about their water quality?**

**Gilthorpe:** Communicate early, communicate often. Refer to specific facts and place them in context. The other advice I would give is that different customers in different situations will have preferences for different channels of communication. You want to make sure you're communicating with customers by voice, by text, through a mobile app, by means of your Web portal, through emails and even, if necessary, through paper. But you also want to ensure that you're communicating with people on a periodic scheduled basis, even if there isn't some amazing good news or amazing bad news in the meantime that triggers some sort of event-based communication. You should certainly have the capability to do event-based communication—for example, if there's a major storm coming through and you have some storm water event that you need to alert people to. And finally ... put tools in the hands of utility staff, so they can put together a report that identifies a

## The Value of Water

When it comes to the Flint crisis, the subtext of poverty is impossible to ignore: Forty percent of Flint residents live below the poverty line, and some have argued that the crisis would not have occurred had Flint been a wealthier suburb.

Gilthorpe and his colleagues are investigating ways to mend relationships between utilities and "the subsection of the population that genuinely has trouble with meeting their water bills," he said.

"Anyone who has looked in the headlines about what's happened in Detroit, or in Baltimore last year—when they were shutting off water to large numbers of customers—would have to acknowledge that this is a problem of financial liability for the utilities and also a political problem," he continued.

While his research is still in its early days, the narrative surrounding issues of income and water is "an interesting story that we're going to hear more about as things unfold," Gilthorpe predicted.

particular set of customers who are facing a particular situation. I think this matrix of having five or six channels to communicate and having two or three or four modalities of communication—schedule based, event based or based on some analysis-driven exercise—really gives you a lot of different opportunities to touch a customer.

**Samovalov: What sorts of data do customers need to receive about their water?**

**Gilthorpe:** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency mandates this periodic Consumer Confidence Report (CCR). It's very long, it's impenetrable—this is not exciting reading. The reality is that most consumers end up not reading it. In any particular part of the country or any particular water system, there is a relatively small subset of those CCRs that are relevant, or even show any variation from one report to another. I think that the way to help consumers with this is to highlight the things that are known to be at issue in a particular water system and to give the executive summary approach in a manner that is data rich, but also attractive. If people aren't motivated to read it, then communication just isn't that useful.

**Samovalov: How can utilities ensure unfounded fear is not instilled into customers in the wake of the Flint crisis?**

**Gilthorpe:** The first thing is to make sure that clear and accurate communication is going out there on a periodic basis so people have something foundational—even if it's relatively basic—to start from. There are actually very good studies that indicate if you are clear and accurate in what you communicate, and you explain why your insight is what it is, then customers don't feel fearful. That's true even when the score isn't perfect, which is perhaps the most counterintuitive piece of this. If you say, "We're here to tell you that our water quality in this district is safe, because the values are this and the safe levels are that, and here are the measures we're taking to ensure that we maintain and improve those scores"—if you have that communication, then customers are not afraid. They're encouraged. **w&wd**

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