



# HANDLING CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE INSTANT INFORMATION AGE

By Mike McGill

We live in the Instant Information Age. We are all receiving information we need to know – and a lot we do not – without having to ask for it.

Customers can be especially demanding of service providers; if there is a problem with something they are paying for, they better be told about it – and fast. If not, they will pull out their phone and find information – or misinformation – in less than a minute.

That is why your utility must become, and stay, the GO-TO source for information about your water and wastewater services.

As I travel the country speaking with water leaders, I try to boost their confidence with crisis communications. “It isn’t rocket science,” I say. “If you treat your communications like any other essential operation, and apply lessons you’ve learned your whole lives about strengthening relationships, you’re going to be successful.”

To back up that premise, I provide the following tips to help communicate during an emergency:

## **BEFORE THE EMERGENCY RAMP UP YOUR EVERYDAY CUSTOMER COMMUNICATIONS**

J.D. Power – the go-to resource on customer satisfaction – polled 40,000 people served by 87 utilities across the country each of the last 2 years.

North. East. South. West. Large. Medium. Small.

The results were clear: the more a utility communicated with the people they serve, the more the public trusted the utility. Customers who remembered one or more



proactive efforts from their utilities rewarded them with 15 to 25% higher satisfaction scores.

Creating this added level of trust before an emergency makes all the difference during one. Dozens of positive stories about your water and sewer work can be promoted on mass social media and you can parlay the added visibility into pushes to increase the number of followers on your feeds. These are essential information streams during an event.

Telling your story ahead of time also sets up your emergency response by enabling you to build on the information you have already made public. It lessens the possibility of the harmful “You didn’t tell us this before!” pushback in the heat of the moment.

## **STRENGTHEN YOUR TIES TO THE COMMUNITY**

Take your stories to your leading community institutions and create a greater level of trust that extends beyond the walls of the organizations. If your first responders, schools, hospitals, major businesses, and houses of worship – just to name a few core constituencies – believe you have their backs, that confidence spreads out to their members and employees. If you also trade emergency contacts, you can easily enlist their help during a crisis.

Community relationships are not limited to institutions anymore. Social media communities are particularly useful during an emergency.

After a transmission main failure knocked out millions of gallons of water supply to



the Cape Fear Region in 2016, a Facebook group about the break was immediately created. During the next 72 hours, more than 10,000 people joined the page.

Thanks to relationship building conducted before the emergency, I was made an administrator of the page and was allowed to post information throughout the crisis. The group quickly became a focal point for water customers and, yes, angry comments were made. However, because of our positioning, we were able to regularly inform the public and quickly address any anger before it took hold among thousands of people.

### **CRAFT YOUR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

Getting clear information out quickly and repeatedly across several mass and social media streams is within your reach, but only if you have planned your strategy well in advance.

A properly crafted crisis communications plan covers every major water and sewer related incident with responses based on scope and length. After all, hurricane-related outreach will require a far different approach than a water main failure that affects a portion of your service area. Both, however, can constitute major emergencies for a utility.

While the plan should be based on industry best practices, it must also incorporate local knowledge from your staff. “One size fits all” doesn’t work when it comes to emergencies and your team knows where your unique hotspots are located.

Employees are assigned to appropriate roles and shifts throughout the 5–12 am “Communications Day,” which is when outreach and monitoring efforts must take place. All of your required statements and critical customer contacts are mapped out with pre-approved materials and staff scripts that can be quickly adjusted and used following a pre-set, quality-control process.

The plan should govern your mass media response and work with the way that newsrooms cover crises. Plan with



them in advance to find out how they will want information from you when everyone is under the gun. They will gain a greater appreciation of what you and your utility must do during an emergency. That’s likely to translate into better coverage.

Finally, the plan outlines how your utility will handle a variety of social media platforms. Guidelines for proactive posting and reactive response are plainly spelled out. Similar to the press, you can strengthen relationships with social media influencers by asking them how they will want to receive information during a crisis.

### **PUT YOUR PLAN TO THE TEST**

Just like any other operational plan, if you do not practice and drill in advance, gaps in your plan will be exposed when it is put under pressure. Tabletops, drills, and exercises should all be used to make sure are ready for prime time.

Often during a crisis, you may be working out of a fully instituted Emergency Operations Center, where the pace can much faster than you would have imagined. Simulations will help you prepare for this environment.

### **DURING AN EMERGENCY, MAKE CRITICAL CUSTOMERS A TOP PRIORITY**

Critical customers need essential information in an instant because public health and safety, or their entire business,

could be at risk. If they are not getting important details from you, they will contact others – especially the media – to get their answers.

I hammer this point home when I speak to water leaders. If you fail to communicate with your critical customers, the quality of your entire response will be called into question. It does not matter if you have saved the day; if your critical customers are left unassisted or confused, the almost-guaranteed negative public attention will harm your utility’s reputation.

Your critical customer list is an essential part of your communications plan, if it’s not already covered under your overall utility management plan. It must be regularly updated with primary and secondary contacts available 24/7/365 and it must cover how your utility will handle calls during every single shift.

### **COMMUNICATE EARLY**

One of the benefits of having an emergency communications plan at the ready is that you will be able to get out front fast and start communicating quickly with a confidence-boosting level of knowledge.

In the case of an emergency like a hurricane, you should communicate before it hits, telling everyone how you’re getting ready for the storm in order to reassure your customers. Most emergencies do not allow the luxury of advance notice. If your



local government is taking the lead, make sure they have your information ASAP. If you are on your own, quickly put your plan in motion.

### COMMUNICATE OFTEN

Once the emergency is underway, you will want to get into a regular communications schedule as soon as possible. Using the “Communications Day,” start the morning off with an update that covers what happened overnight and what you are going to do that day.

If possible, capture shots and videos of the situation, then send the content out to the press and the public via YouTube, social media platforms, and traditional communication streams. Later in the afternoon, before the evening newscasts, produce another update detailing what happened during the day and what the utility’s response will be the next day.

Yes, social media can change everything. However, the “Communications Day” approach still works for the guts of what you need to do. Pushing out regular updates via social media streams, and through influencers with whom you have built relationships, will cover a lot of ground – not all of it, mind you, but a lot of it.

Team with your staff to monitor social media for customer confusion and anger. Make sure your employees know they are empowered to inform the top of the communications chain AT ANY TIME when they see problems arise.

When flareups occur, assigned staff will handle the response, shielding the employees from outrage and mistakes that could harm their careers.

Will people attack you on social media during an emergency? Yes, but understand that those people make up a small percentage of the people actually reading the information. If you plow through the anger with consistent, calm, clear answers that cut through the confusion, you will win the respect of the masses.

### COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

During a crisis, your customers are also dealing with the impacts on their daily lives.

What does it mean for their family? What does it mean for their home? What does it mean for their job?

They do not have time to be bombarded with esoteric statements or statistics. What they want is the latest information they need to get through their day.

Always lead with the essential information first, even if there have not been any changes since the last update. Then provide the secondary information and reinforcing messages about the strength of the utility’s response.

The information should be presented in short, succinct statements. Emergencies are not the time for the public to be bombarded with information they do not need; transparently give them what they need to know in a way that bolsters their confidence in your efforts.

### ANTICIPATE CURVEBALLS

It is likely that the utility’s response will not go according to plan. The key is not to panic.

Again, the more transparent and informative you are during a crisis, the more everyone will trust the utility’s actions. When curveballs occur, adjust by using the structure of your communications plan.

You may have to add an extra update, additional content, or provide another round of interviews. However, the rest of your communications plan must continue to be implemented as directed. Do not fill one gap and create a new one.

Your messaging approach does not change. Essential information is given first, followed by positive, reinforcing statements about the response. That’s what your customers are looking for from you.

### AFTER THE EMERGENCY

Keep Communicating About Improvement. Use Milestones. Most of us have been through “hotwashes,” where utilities take an honest look at their responses and determine areas for improvement. Letting the public know you are taking a hard look at yourselves will leave a positive impression coming out of the emergency

and set up confident feelings going into the next one.

If an emergency is of particular note, you can even use its anniversary to change the narrative. In 2008, the utility I was working for suffered a 66-inch transmission main break next to a major road during the height of the morning rush. Helicopter and swift boat rescues of commuters were broadcast live around the world.

We anticipated that the one-year anniversary would get significant coverage, so we created our own event to mark the date. We brought the media back out to the break site and rotated reporters through stations where experts detailed all of the utility’s efforts over the past year. We also provided pre-produced video of our acoustic monitoring program and used several photogenic “show-and-tell” items.

The result: dozens of positive stories on local and national outlets showcasing the utility’s emergency response. The public script flipped. A failure that nearly killed people on live TV was never again mentioned as a negative. In fact, the utility still showcases the break and the positive steps it took afterward as an example of its thought leadership within the water industry.

Communicating successfully during a crisis combines the basic principles we use in our everyday relationships with the treatment of public information as another essential operation within a utility.

If you communicate effectively before an emergency, prepare, plan, and clearly implement your approach early and often, your utility will come through for your customers when the pressure is on. And they will thank you for it.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before founding WaterPIO, a public relations firm dedicated to helping water utilities of all sizes improve their customer and crisis communications, **Mike McGill** directed public information and customer service operations at utilities for a dozen years. Before joining the Water World, McGill was a news producer for CNN and WUSA-TV in Washington, DC. [✉](#)