
Communications

Background

The water supply, quality and reliability challenges facing Metropolitan, California, the Southwest and the nation are rapidly increasing in their complexity, from stresses on imported supplies, legal and institutional restrictions to global climate change presenting significant local and regional impacts. Along with other important local and regional issues such as water supply allocations, mandatory conservation, and budget and rate decisions, Metropolitan faces the need to educate the public and other stakeholders about the fast-changing landscape as an important element of successful water supply reliability and management.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California was established in 1928 under an act of the California Legislature to import water supplies for its service area in Southern California which now includes all or portions of six Southern California counties: Ventura, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego. Under the Act, Metropolitan is responsible for disseminating information about the District, its mission and activities.

The External Affairs Group is responsible for communicating with Metropolitan's 26 member public agencies, legislative and community leaders, the media, the general public and various other stakeholder and interest groups. Our functions and processes include:

- Promoting, enhancing and seeking support for Metropolitan's mission, operations, policies and programs aimed at achieving the District's core job of providing reliable supplies of imported water in an environmentally and economically responsible way;
- Communicating the adopted policies of Metropolitan's Board of Directors and providing consistent, accurate and clear communications to convey the District's role and responsibilities in water supply, resource planning and management, water quality, conservation and other water policy issues through multiple outreach channels;
- Working with local, state and federal elected officials to advance Metropolitan's key priorities and current programs and projects, and conveying the mission and operational interests of Metropolitan and its Member Agencies;
- Enhancing partnerships with other government agencies, businesses, environmental organizations, community groups as well as other stakeholders; and
- Providing timely and accurate information to the media about water-related subjects as well as Metropolitan's programs, projects and issues by working with reporters and editors from newspapers, Internet news sites, magazines, radio and television, social networking (e.g., FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr) and Internet-based (Web site) outreach and marketing as well as trade and specialty publications.

This position paper focuses on the communications aspect of External Affairs' responsibilities to convey Metropolitan's mission, goals, key policies, priorities and programs.

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Overarching Communication Strategies

- Be proactive and responsive to current legislative, policies and programmatic issues and water supply conditions, while at the same time being flexible to address water supply and reliability issues as conditions change.
- Take advantage of changing circumstances to advance Metropolitan's mission, policies, priorities and programs.
- Employ and build on the experience of and the relationships developed and fostered by the Board of Directors, executive management and External Affairs' legislative, customer service, community relations, education and media teams to advance Metropolitan's messages about priorities and current projects.
- Utilize mass advertising and public outreach strategies to lead the water supply and conservation education/messaging, and support the advertising plan with earned media, targeted publications, school, social networking and Internet-based (Web site) outreach and marketing. Conduct quantitative and qualitative research among Southern Californians to guide and test messages and to measure campaign effectiveness.
- Expand on existing and develop new business, labor and community partnerships to advance awareness and understanding of water supply, reliability and quality issues, expand education mechanisms to reach more people, businesses and other stakeholders about Metropolitan's key priorities, policies and programs as well as provide water-saving information, messages and tips, and help prepare for a sustainable future.
- Monitor media and other web-based resources to track issues, spot trends and gauge public interest and concern; measure Metropolitan's success in communicating messages to inform and solicit feedback in public forums and briefings.

2010/2011 Goals

- Create dynamic messaging, produce corresponding materials, and implement proactive, integrated communications activities that support Board-approved policies and legislative priorities that advance the Bay Delta Conservation Plan; support implementation of the Delta Water Policy package; Colorado River issues including the authorization of a long-term, multi-state Hoover Power contract; and advocate funding for programs that address the impacts of climate change.
- Design and implement an integrated communications plan that utilizes a variety of tools that create synergy for wide-reaching impact on all target audiences. This focused effort will produce a combined effect that is greater than the individual tool's effects. These tools include: advertising, earned media outreach, partnerships, social media, Internet-based activities, community and special events, and targeted publications. Utilize key staff in grassroots communication efforts in collaboration with Member Agencies.
- Foster clear lines of communication and consistent messaging to our workforce, the media and others as the District re-engages in labor negotiations.

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- Continue to expand the use of social media networks (e.g., FaceBook, YouTube, Flickr) and Metropolitan’s public Web sites (www.mwdh2o.com and www.bewaterwise.com) to communicate to the public about water supply, reliability and quality issues as well as provide conservation tips. This effort is aimed at increasing our audience including the number of unique visitors to the Web sites and subscribers to Metropolitan’s e-newsletter, “Your Water.”
- Provide training on crisis communications procedures and protocols within the District and with Member Agencies to ensure smooth and clear communications during advisory and urgent situations.
- Work with Member Agencies to launch the middle school supplemental curriculum “Conservation Connection: Water and Energy in Southern California” recently approved by the California Department of Education.

Resources and Core Competencies: A Snapshot

Metropolitan’s Board of Directors and staff have strong and well-established relationships with various audiences, including local, state and federal elected leaders, community groups, business organizations, media contacts and educators. The External Affairs Group includes a staff experienced in key areas including government affairs, business and community outreach, media, communications and education. Our staff includes a combination of long-term Metropolitan employees who possess invaluable institutional knowledge and historical perspective. We also have staff that joined the agency more recently and who bring a variety of backgrounds and experience, a fresh look and different perspectives.

Challenges

- Responding to changing water supply and reliability conditions in the face of significant challenges as Metropolitan’s main sources of imported supplies, particularly deliveries from Northern California through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, remain hindered by regulatory limitations.
- Applying information management/expectation management in the real-time data world.
- Controlling data overload – how to ensure messages are meaningful and that they rise above the noise in the age of information explosion...and, in particular, “instantaneous explosions” (e.g., Twitter).
- Establishing and utilizing approved criteria for urgent versus responsive versus mandatory notice versus human interest messaging and information management.
- Layering information for ease of access from sound bite to statement to story to background links so reader, listener and viewer can get what they need by skimming the surface or diving deep to access more information.
- Simplifying for the sake of the reader/listener/viewer and provide “to-the-point” messages that are easy to receive and understand. Avoid providing too much information but utilize the “layering” method for those who want to dig deeper.

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- Identifying and employing efficient utilization of data management/retrieval needs.
- Remaining nimble and flexible with the platforms and messaging that are continuously changing and evolving.
- Ensuring that all Metropolitan staff – throughout the various groups – are delivering the same message consistently (e.g., “singing from the same book”).
- Maintaining a consistent look and feel (e.g., seal, color, font, templates) in all collateral materials produced throughout Metropolitan. This will help ensure that audiences easily recognize the Metropolitan “brand” reflective of a single Metropolitan look – and, message.
- Working within reduced budgets, continue to meet the key objectives of the External Affairs Group and Board priorities.
- Staying on top of and current with communication technology which can be expensive especially in light of constrained budgets.
- Successfully developing and implementing a workforce succession plan.

Looking Ahead...Communication Strategies in 2010 through 2060

Massive changes in media consumption are happening at a faster pace than ever before. These changes also reflect important human trends which will affect messaging strategies and outreach efforts.

Current trends in media and messaging suggest a continued proliferation of media channels to reach various audiences in Southern California and throughout the world. The pace of change in media alternatives is unprecedented. For example:

- Currently 75 percent of the people in the United States are currently using social technology. (Forrester 2008)
- Adoption of Twitter has exceeded expectations. Twitter’s growth rate is well over 1,000 percent users per month. (Twitter 2009)
- The use of video to attract attention and communicate is also growing rapidly. Thirteen hours of video content is uploaded to YouTube every minute. (YouTube 2009)
- Social media is rapidly becoming mainstream media with increases in social networks and channels.
- If Facebook users were a country, it would be the fourth most populous country in the world. (Facebook 2009)
- The amount of photos shared on Flickr now numbers 3.5 billion. (Flickr, June 2009)
- This all adds up to make social networking a more popular online activity than e-mail today – about 10 percent of total time spent online. (Nielsen 2009)

What is most relevant to future trends is that 85 percent of all current social media users think companies should be actively interacting with their consumers in social media.

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As we monitor the multitude of current media channels, what is important to ascertain is not what the next channel will be but rather the patterns that are developing in information gathering, sharing, adoption and retention. The channel will most certainly mutate into various forms over the next 50 years, but the target audience of the communications will remain relatively the same for Metropolitan: our Member Agencies, other consumers and stakeholders, the media and general public. Concentrating on the patterns of communications, the following are highlights of some of the guidelines and implications for communications in the future.

Two-way and multi-person communication...

Young people growing up today will be the rate payers and opinion leaders of 2060. Their absorption of media and communications is radically different than what Baby Boomers have adapted to. They are accustomed to the “democratization” of journalism. They expect to have two-way or a multi-person dialogue about pertinent news and information.

Mass media will play a small role...

Customized media channels will be needed to provide detailed information in a real-time as needed basis. Issues such as water supply, reliability and the quality of water will still be relevant issues. But, the level of scientific knowledge and scrutiny will require different forms of information – and, different channels of information.

Reciprocal communications will be the norm. Consumers can and will inquire – and, will expect detailed immediate responses.

Consumers want to innovate...

Consumers are a creative force. They want to be heard and offer ideas that make their lives easier. It will be essential to find ways beyond focus groups and other panels to allow consumers to provide ideas and feedback. We must make it a conversation not just a one-time occurrence. Solutions to issues will become more of a collaborative effort. Outreach will include earlier input and require timely communications.

A world converged...

The idea of TVs, cell phones, video game consoles and radios will have been long forgotten. There will simply be a personal device (possibly paper thin or embedded in our skin) that charges without wires and connects us seamlessly to the entire world.

Information on-demand...

The world will know our likes and dislikes and provide connections accordingly. It will anticipate our next move and help us to navigate it more efficiently. It will connect us to people, products and services that we wish to encounter and shield us from the rest.

Brands and Advertising: A two-way street...

Audiences will no longer be “targeted.” Instead, conversations will ensue. Billboards will be customized to the passerby. Our time will never be “wasted” with messages we do not want to hear. Products and services will accommodate our needs on a whim. The grocery store will know our likes and have a basket waiting for us. Starbucks will have our favorite coffee sitting on the counter when we walk in.

Easy communication...

Writing is anticipated to nearly disappear. We will speak to our devices or they will hear our thoughts. The notion of a screen will be a distant memory. Images and messages will float in mid-air, and we can interact with them as we choose. As for reading, who knows? The world will be sensing our mood, actions, eye movements, feelings and will tailor our experience.

Conclusion

Metropolitan's world has dramatically evolved in a single generation. From a singular focus on securing imported water supplies, Metropolitan, working with its Member Agencies, has now established a broad "portfolio" philosophy that increasingly relies on local solutions such as conservation, recycling and groundwater cleanup. As environmental challenges have mounted in the Delta, Metropolitan has taken a leading role in advancing environmental restoration and new water management approaches so that water reliability and ecosystem sustainability go hand in hand. The evolving mission of Metropolitan comes during an era of an explosion in communications options. As noted in the Memphis Business Journal, "Wi-fi, wikis, instant messaging, smartphones and various telephony products have brought about an era of instant communication that for most industries has passed beyond the point of convenience and into necessity." As Metropolitan moves forward, the challenge is to effectively communicate in multiple formats in ways that meet the demands of our customers, consumers and the general public...not only for convenience but for necessity.