



Mistake #1

Only communicate when required

Due to city ordinance, state and federal requirements, water and electricity providers are required to communicate on certain subjects. Therefore, many utilities and municipalities only communicate when they are required to by law. This could include rate hikes, annual reports, violation notifications, outages or other information that can be perceived as negative or boring.

The reasons for this vary, and can be due budget and/or time restraints, etc. Sometimes it's due to a belief that there is no need to communicate with customers because rarely do utilities compete for customers. In many areas customers don't choose a water, sewer or electricity provider. This can create a mindset that there isn't a need to 'market' or communicate with customers because the customers have to buy the service. Well, that mindset is a clear mistake.

You've probably heard this before, but consumers today are more educated and savvy than ever. With access to endless information on the web and having content available at their fingertips through technology, customers expect to hear from companies, brands and services. They also expect to be able to go find information by you when they want it. This expectation is a shift in the marketplace as

customers align themselves and appreciate companies that make the effort to build a relationship and trust with them.

Utilities are in a perfect position to build trust because utilities provide an incredibly valuable service and are experts in their industry. Instead of only giving 'bad' information such as rate increases, outages, etc., utilities are positioned to become a resource and provide valuable tools, tips, programs and time savings services. Customers are busier than ever so understanding options to save money and time is very valuable.

With messages bombarding consumers constantly throughout the day, having steady and reliable information available to your customers builds trust over time, therefore allowing them to know that you are there when they need you. Also, it provides them understanding of what you are doing. They may not read every word of what you put out there for them, but they do know that you are offering programs and services and tips for them. Then, when the mandatory communications, such as a rate increase, come around, there is much less change of cranky customers because they know you are doing good work and are a resource to them.

Solution

Become a Trusted Resource, Communicate Consistently

Mistake #2

'Stuff' every topic possible into every inch of space.

Whether talking to a friend, family member or colleague, mixed messages are confusing. So, why would you send mixed messages out to your customers? That's exactly what happens when way too many topics and information are squished into one communication piece.

Often times mistake 1 and 2 are made at the same time. Because communication is done only when required, then the organization stuffs everything possible into stuffed into the outreach piece. The feeling of being able to check it off the list as a topic that's been communicated, often outweighs any effectiveness at all. The end result is that the utility 'claims' they communicated on the topic, yet, at the same time, no one reads any of it because there's just too much there and it's overwhelming.

Maybe this comparison will help; if you are in a conversation with a friend and you want to get a point across, do you talk about 10 topics at once? Or even 3 or 5 topics? No, you discuss that one topic. And, when discussing that 1 topic, you don't list of 25 things with that topic, you pick the 3-5 that are the most important.

Now, let's relate this to utility outreach. When thinking of tips on conservation, it's easy to come up with 20 tips, but your readers or viewers will be overwhelmed and think it's just too much. They don't want to feel like they are studying for a test, they want just a few, simple, short and easy to remember tips. Then determine the top 3 actions, tips or information you want your customers to walk away with and focus on that. If they remember 1 of the tips and take action, you've succeeded!

Solution

Prioritize and communicate simply





Mistake #3

Send out letterhead and expect readership

There is a time and a place for letterhead, but using it as a main way to communicate with customers is just not effective. Let's visualize and think about this for a minute; letterhead isn't very enticing and is definitely not fun. Do you ever read letters on letterhead? It's more likely you notice the large postcard and bright message from a competitor to your phone or cable company.

When considering how many messages are reaching your customers every day, communications must stand out to break through all the clutter and noise in order for your message to be 'heard'. For example, if the objective of the communication piece is to

remind customers to have backflow tested, or trees/shrubs cleared from fire hydrants and houses for fire safety, writing about it on letterhead will not resonate and connect with many customers. In fact, you'd be lucky if they read it at all.

Then, when you consider the cost of postage and overall investment that is being made in mailing out anything, it doesn't make any sense to send out something that won't get noticed or read. Use your opportunity to communicate and your budget wisely. If you are going to spend, spend it correctly with creativity rather than letterhead to connect with your customers.

Solution

Communicate Creatively



Mistake #4

Low resolution photos are used and/or clip art and graphics are poor

There is nothing easy or simple about running cities and utilities because cities and utilities are complex organizations. It takes educated, trained and focused teams to provide quality services to customers and citizens each and every day. And, when it comes to water and electricity, each and every second of every day. It takes professionals, and not only professionals, but professionals at the top of their game.

So why would you ever consider putting out any communications that didn't match the professionalism of your organization? Well, it happens all the time. Low resolution photos, blurry photos, clip art, inconsistent fonts, inconsistent or clashing colors and even typos. Every piece of communication that is distributed, whether by website, paper bills, brochures, community events and trade shows etc, all represent your organization; your very

professional organization. It's no wonder that without any communication or seeing and experiencing low quality communication, your customers get cranky if there is an outage, rate increase or any issue with a bill etc. How a utility presents itself in every aspect of communication and outreach, builds a brand for your customers. So, if there is an issue, the customer has been trained to believe that your team may not be as professional as they are. I doubt any city or utility wants to be portrayed as anything less than the very professional operation they are.

Outreach and communication is much more than the words that are printed; it's an extension of your operation and organization, so make sure that when you do communicate, you communicate as the professionals that you are.

Solution

Communicate Professionally



Mistake #5

Engineering Speak.

It happens in every industry; a specific language and acronyms is established. As a municipal and or utility professional, you are working in your industry and specialty each and every day, making the terminology and language second nature for you. The key word(s) is that it's second nature for YOU! Your customers are not speaking your language and hearing your acronyms each day. Unless they've studied your area of expertise in detail, they likely have no idea how it works, why it works or what you actually do. Therefore, having a technical engineer communicate with your customers may result a lost opportunity to really connect

with them. The last thing we want as communicators is to push away our customers because they feel like they should understand the information you are sending but they don't. No one likes to feel that way.

Budgets are tight, time is tight and opportunities to connect with customers may be less than you'd like. So, when you do have the opportunity, to get in front of your customers and grab their attention, make sure you are connecting with language they understand so they read it, and start to think of you as more than 'just' a bill they have to pay each month.

Solution

Communicate Appropriately

Summary

Hopefully, you will remember one or two of these tips, but ideally you'll keep these tips close by and follow them with your next outreach project.

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Communicate Consistently

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Communicate Simply

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Communicate Creatively

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Communicate Professionally

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Communicate Appropriately

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