

# **IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING ABOUT A DESAL PROJECT**

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## **Introduction**

Public understanding and support are critical to the success of desalination projects. Delivering the right messages – at the right time, in the right context, and to the right audiences – are keys to the successful implementation of a public communication plan for a desalination project. Developing and delivering these critical messages are at the heart of a strategic outreach and awareness plan.

## **The Challenges of Desalination**

As many communities consider desalination as a sustainable water source that can bolster their water portfolios, agencies proposing desalination projects must answer questions about energy usage, brine concentrate disposal, and impacts to marine life. Any new water project — whether it's a dam, reservoir or recycled water project — can face significant hurdles when it comes to public acceptance. Desalination is no different, and has its own unique set of challenges. In order to help water providers bring these projects to fruition, robust public outreach programs must be implemented to build trust within communities, elicit stakeholder input, and contribute to public understanding and support.

### **Developing Effective Messages is Crucial**

The development and delivery of effective and clear messages is the foundation of a successful strategic outreach and awareness plan. One of the fundamental findings in our research was that the communication and outreach efforts must be tailored to specific projects. There is no “cookie-cutter” approach to the design and implementation of a desalination project, and neither is there a single approach to developing a communication plan. Each community or region's water supply situation, political climate, and regulatory environment are unique to their location and require a carefully tailored approach to outreach and awareness efforts.

For example, there is a correlation between the perceived need for an additional water supply and the level of community support for desalination. Regions with a history of water supply shortages, in particular when those shortages have had a direct impact on the quality of life and economy of the community, clearly enjoy more support for desalination projects. Not surprisingly, those communities that have been getting by with existing supplies and have not been inconvenienced by shortages, are less inclined to support desalination. Messages that place a proposed desalination project in the larger context of the community's long-term water supply needs are effective in generating community support.

## **Strategic Outreach and Awareness Plan**

A strategic outreach and awareness plan should serve as the framework for all the communication efforts that take place in support of a desalination project. The outreach plan will provide all stakeholders involved in the process – members of the public, elected officials, environmental groups, regulators – with

the historical context and information about why the project is being proposed. Understanding the purpose or need for the project will allow stakeholders to make informed and educated decisions about desalination. The backbone of the outreach and awareness plan is message development and delivery. Simply having all the information available if someone wants to see it is not enough. Desalination involves a number of technical and complex processes that must be presented in formats and language that stakeholders can understand. And the outreach plan outlines all the ways that agencies will share information with members of the community about the desalination project.

Developing a strategic outreach and awareness plan and key messages involves these initial steps:

- Identify your communication goal and objectives
- Conduct community research such as one-on-one interviews, telephone surveys and focus groups to identify community interests and concerns, as well as the supporters and opponents
- Develop your key messages, as well as the strategies and outreach activities or tactics that help you accomplish your communication goal and objectives

### **Telling Your Project Story**

Telling the project water story is the foundation for development of key messages. Creating an understanding of the history of the region's water supply, past projects, studies and current planning will raise public awareness of the need for desalination and contribute to community support. The project story puts the project in a historical perspective that is easily understood and lays out the review process and decisions that were made to select desalination as the preferred option. These are some of the questions the project water story should answer:

What are the purpose and need for the project?

- What is the core problem and why is there a water shortage?
- Can't we just conserve more water?

What are the alternatives?

- What other water supply options or alternatives have been explored and/or should be explored further?
- How were those options analyzed?
- How will desalination solve our water problem?

Project specific issues

- Where will the water be used?
- What will happen if we *don't* do the project?
- What are the benefits of the project?
- What are the potential impacts of desalination?
- How much will it cost and when will it be complete?
- Where else is desalination being used to solve water scarcity?
- What are the impacts that may relate to growth, the environment, the community's economic vitality?

### **Developing Key Messages for Outreach**

The development and delivery of consistent and effective messages are critical to the success of a public outreach program. The information gathered from interviews and surveys should be used in conjunction with the project story to develop the key messages. These messages should be used in outreach materials, talking points, ads, press releases, presentations and more. The following are some key messages that have been effective in desalination projects:

- Desalination is a drought-proof, local water supply
- Desalination is one of a number of water supply sources and strategies that can comprise a community's water portfolio
- Drought, climate change and increasing environmental regulation will greatly reduce available water
- Desalinating seawater will reduce the overdraft of local groundwater
- An adequate local water supply will benefit the local community and economy by providing water for businesses
- Advances in technology are reducing the potential impacts of desalination. These include more efficient screening to protect marine life and more efficient filtration devices to reduce energy demands and greenhouse gases
- A new source of water from desalination will reduce the dependence on outside sources such as imported water, which are becoming unreliable
- Improves water independence and self-reliance
- Desalinated water is a locally controlled resource
- Development of any new water supply will be expensive – but only desal provides an unlimited water supply

### **Delivering the Messages**

After the key messages have been developed, it is important to identify the challenges and opportunities for delivery of the messages. Being prepared to deliver the messages in a variety of formats and circumstances will allow the messages to be heard by as many stakeholders as possible.

Challenges from the public, media, stakeholders, elected officials or regulators could include any of the following:

- Vocal activists opposing the project for a variety of reasons, including growth impacts, impacts to marine life, desal's energy demands and carbon footprint, and safe disposal of brine concentrate
- Elected officials, special interest groups and other community residents who are either uninformed or misinformed, or oppose the project and damage the project's reputation
- Cost of the project will raise rates
- Regulatory agencies unfamiliar with the technology
- Agency's history of unpopular projects
- Distrust of the agency or the agency's governing body

Opportunities for acceptance can come from:

- Desalination as a drought-proof, local source of water
- The uncertainty of future water supplies due to: climate change, environmental regulations, overdrafting of groundwater, saltwater intrusion to drinking water wells, lack of alternative supplies without importation of water from a distance
- The importance of an adequate, local water supply for the local economy and quality of life
- Other funding sources available to offset costs
- Pilot projects that demonstrate efficacy of desalination
- Public surveys showing support for desalination

## **Identify Key Stakeholder Groups**

Stakeholder groups should be identified and strategies developed to make sure each group is contacted and informed about the project. Stakeholder groups can be divided into categories (such as general public, elected officials, businesses, civic groups, environmental organizations, agency employees and policy makers, potentially affected property owners and businesses) to ensure that a complete list is developed. The main goal of identifying stakeholder groups is to be inclusive and ensure that the concerns of all stakeholders will be addressed. Their concerns should be taken into account as messages and delivery methods are developed. Examples of general categories, and types of groups, that might be included in a list of stakeholders for a desalination project:

- General public – Water customers, residents living in the area of a proposed desalination plant, members of homeowners associations, civic groups.
- Environmental groups – Groups such as Surfrider, Save the Bay, the Sierra Club, Food and Water Watch have specific interests in different aspects of proposed desalination projects. For example, opposition from Surfrider may focus on marine impacts, while the Sierra Club's primary concerns might be about energy impacts and growth-related issues. They will often have local affiliate groups.
- Elected and appointed officials – Members of boards or councils who are considering the project, city managers, department heads, representatives of neighboring jurisdictions, state and federal officials.
- Media – Local reporters and editors at newspapers, TV and radio reporters and web-based news outlets, including bloggers and Twitter feeds.
- Internal staff – Water and Public Works directors and staff, members of the City Manager's or County Administrator's offices, customer service and finance departments. Also, identify workers in the field who have regular contact with the public and educate them about the project.
- Business leaders – Members of local business groups, Chamber of Commerce, building industry association, small business owners, business leaders.
- Government agencies – Include agencies with overlapping jurisdictions and regulatory agencies. Example: If the desal project is proposed by a city, be sure to include surrounding cities and counties in your stakeholder outreach. Also include any state or federal agency responsible for oversight, permitting and/or funding.

## **Develop Strategies for Stakeholder Groups**

It is important to develop strategies to accomplish communication goals and objectives at the beginning of the planning process. The strategies will need to be revised or modified as circumstances change throughout the market assessments, development of messages and materials, environmental review, permitting, approval, construction, and project start-up. These changes will affect the development of informational materials and other outreach tactics. Because the needs and interests of each stakeholder group will vary, it is important that goals and strategies be developed for each individual stakeholder group. Strategies and key messages should be updated to reflect progress on the project's planning, design and construction. Examples of these strategies and tasks include:

- Start communicating to stakeholders during the planning phase
- Continuity is a key – Maintain communication even during lulls or quiet periods
- Maintain communication during the construction phase
- Communication should be ongoing in all formats – newsletters, websites, emails, etc.
- Be direct in addressing the issues raised by project opponents

- Maintain close contact with elected officials throughout the life of the project
- Always be available to respond to media inquiries and requests
- Prepare a crisis plan in the event of emergencies or unexpected events
- Meet with regulator regularly and keep them informed and up-to-date on the project
- Keep agency staff informed and in the loop – they are often who the public sees or talks to first
- Schedule meetings and presentations with community and special interest groups, such as civic organizations, business, environmental and agricultural groups

### **Questions the Public and other Stakeholders Will Probably Ask**

There are many questions that will be asked by stakeholders during the planning, review and construction of a desalination project. Being prepared for the most challenging questions ensures that you appear informed, prepared and that the process is transparent. Questions may include:

- Why can't we just conserve more water?
- Have you installed low-flow fixtures in every home or business?
- Have you explored all other supply options or alternatives?
- How were those options analyzed?
- How will desalination solve our water problem?
- Doesn't desalination use a lot of energy?
- Why would you consider an energy-intensive technology given what we know about climate change and greenhouse gases?
- How are you addressing the environmental impacts of the project?
- How will you dispose safely of the brine concentrate?
- How will you protect the marine life that could be harmed?
- How much will it cost and when will it be complete?
- How will it be financed? What is the total cost?
- Where else is desalination being used to successfully solve water scarcity?
- Won't this contribute to growth?
- How will this affect my water bill?
- Why are you building it in my neighborhood?

### **Delivering the Message**

Creating Communication Awareness Materials – The creation of a suite of communication materials and message delivery tools is a key element of a strategic outreach plan. With the advent of social media and the prevalence of the internet, the reach of communication tools extends beyond the traditional printed materials. Printed matter is still important – many stakeholders want to have a takeaway handout that they can refer to later – but that is just one instrument in a larger toolkit. Printed materials, such as fact sheets and brochures, complement face-to-face discussions and presentations. A segment of each stakeholder group can be reached through social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and these new media should be incorporated into an outreach plan. A well-managed Facebook page can expand the audience a project reaches, demonstrate support and sometimes criticism, and provide a venue for timely updates. A dynamic and user-friendly website is an indispensable element of any outreach program.

One of the first steps in developing outreach materials is creating a consistent look and feel for all materials, including the project website, handouts and awareness ads. Some agencies develop a name and

logo for their desalination projects, particularly if they are partnering with other agencies. The table below lists of some of the materials and media to consider for creating communication tools and the groups they are designed to reach:

Audience						Outreach Material	
General Public	Environmental Groups	Elected Officials	Media	Regulatory Agencies	Internal Staff	Business Leaders	
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	“Branding” the project with a name and logo that is simple and will help audiences identify the project.
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Create a project brochure that tells the “Project Story.” This is a primer on the agency’s water situation: How we got here, what the problem is, and how we are going to solve it. The story should include a brief history of the reports that have been prepared and alternatives that have been studied that led to the current desalination proposal. It should also place desalination in context both with the other water supply components in the agency’s portfolio and its water conservation program.
•	•	•	•		•	•	Email Broadcasts – Build a permission-based email broadcast list to send out regular monthly project updates and notices of special events or meetings.
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Project Website – Establish a website dedicated to project information. This includes reports, maps, white papers, relevant documents, news articles, videos, fact sheets, FAQs and other materials.
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Frequently Asked Questions – FAQs are a staple of any public outreach toolkit. They provide an easy to read guide to desalination that translates technical and complex processes into plain language.
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Facebook and Twitter – Use social media to broaden your audience. Many agencies use Facebook and Twitter in lieu of traditional sources such as newspapers or radio. Facebook can also be used as an advertising outlet to target very specific audiences by location. Use caution when setting up a Facebook page’s interactive features.
•	•		•		•	•	YouTube – Post short videos on the project website, to explain various aspects of the project, water supply, brine disposal, the desalination process, etc.
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Fact Sheets – These are brief (back and front) informational handouts that can give a quick overview of the project or focus on a specific issue, such as energy usage or marine impacts.
•	•	•	•		•	•	Newsletters – A project newsletter can be effective in keeping stakeholders up to date on various aspects of the project, such as the environmental review process, status of grant funding or the results from a pilot plant project.
•	•		•		•	•	Newspaper and magazine awareness ads – These are still the primary source of information for many members of the public and should be part of the overall outreach program.
•	•	•			•	•	Radio and public service announcements – Similar to newspapers and print media, radio can be an effective vehicle for project meeting notices and awareness messages, depending on the reach, market share and format of the stations.
•	•		•		•	•	Media Kit – This is an indispensable item for reaching out to the media and other groups. A media kit will include many of the items listed above, such as fact sheets, brochures and newsletters. It could also include news clippings about alternatives evaluated, other desalination projects and desalination in general.
•	•	•			•	•	Exhibit Booth for Public Events – A portable display booth should include graphics, maps and illustrations that depict the project and why it is needed. For example: a diagram that illustrates the effects of saltwater intrusion into a groundwater well can help explain why desalination is needed. The exhibits should tell the Project Story visually and quickly. Personnel staffing the booth should be people-friendly and familiar with project issues and community concerns.

**Table 1.** A list of some suggested outreach materials and their target audiences.

### Most Significant Challenges

Among the most significant public acceptance challenges desal projects have faced were communicating the purpose and need for the project; educating the public about their water sources and the true cost of water; cost of desalination; energy demands; marine life impacts; growth inducement perceptions; environmental impacts; project location; and construction impacts.

The most significant regulatory and political challenges include the number of regulating agencies and the time-consuming and sometimes onerous regulatory process. Some of those surveyed had adversarial relationships with regulatory agencies, while others reported success in educating regulators about their

project. Others reported it was helpful to create public and political support to help move projects through approval processes.

The greatest overall challenge to educating the public, elected officials and the media about using desalination as a new water source was getting people to understand the drivers for new water supplies and how desalination fits into a community's water supply portfolio. There is a perception that the public takes water for granted and lacks basic knowledge about their water systems, which suggests that it is important to include basic knowledge of water systems and supply as part of the message delivery program.

## **Summary of Strategies for Success**

Here is a list of strategies that have been effective in other outreach campaigns for desalination and water supply projects:

- Start by developing an outreach and awareness plan that has the support of the project team and agency.
- Conduct community research – We strongly recommend conducting a survey to shape your communications. A telephone survey that is demographically reflective of your community is a starting point for messaging – it is critical to find out what the community thinks about the project. In addition to telephone surveys, in-person iPad surveys, exit surveys and even focus groups have all contributed and proved useful in planning effective communication programs. In addition, one-on-one interviews can help provide basic information for developing effective outreach messages and tools.
- Allocate an adequate budget for staff and/or consultants to carry out public notifications, outreach and awareness efforts throughout all project phases.
- Develop the agency's Project Story that puts the desalination project in a historical perspective and in context with other water supplies and water conservation, explains what studies have led to the current alternative, and lays out the purpose and need for the project.
- Reach out early to all the key stakeholder groups and involve them in the initial planning process. Listen and respond to their concerns. Keep them informed throughout project phases and continue to be the voice and informational resource of the project.
- Talk early and often to the community. Address critics' concerns and fears.
- Regarding potential greenhouse gas effects, consider finding ways to access renewable power portfolios.
- Keep elected officials in the loop – maintain close communication with elected officials throughout the life of the project. Elections are likely to occur before the project is operational and new officials need to be briefed and kept informed.
- Be as transparent as possible (if possible, hold site visits to the plant). Transparency builds trust.
- Report any mishaps. Develop a crisis plan for any incidents or emergencies.
- Seek the support of elected officials. The governing board of any agency controls the budgets, timelines and approval process. Keeping the mayor or board chair involved every step of the way is essential to a successful project. Elicit the leadership of elected officials in informing the public.
- Maintain good media relations. Establish a good rapport with editors and reporters. Be open, transparent and available. Provide all the information they need to cover the desalination story fairly. Meet with local newspapers' editorial boards and other key media

outlets periodically and prior to project milestones and decision points. Include a social media program that provides up-to-date information to the media and all other stakeholders.

- Have a team available to the community to directly answer questions.
- Make yourself available to attend community functions.
- Communicate with other agencies and jurisdictions. Your project does not exist in a vacuum. Establish communication with outside agencies, neighboring cities and jurisdictions. Their understanding and support is important.
- Meet with regulators and agencies that will be involved in permitting or regulating the project early and often in the planning process to ensure they understand what is being proposed. This will avoid unexpected hurdles or surprises.
- Focus on political leaders, people who support them, chambers of commerce, and other community leaders (people who can impact public opinion in a negative or positive way).
- Identify a champion who can communicate and relate to an audience; have your champion with you the whole time.
- Gain support from key groups – they will almost do the work for you.
- Make sure you have the best experts in the subject matter you are dealing with all lined up; know and have your facts straight.
- Learn from others that have been successful in your region or around the world.