

“CAN WHAT WE DON’T KNOW HURT US?” PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE: WHAT’S WORKING, WHAT ISN’T?

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Learning to break through the anxiety

What is it about recycled water that compelled a group of citizens to stay up until 3:30 in the morning to protest its use at a city council meeting? They truly perceived and believed there was a problem – fearing a danger to their children that had no scientific basis whatsoever.

What can we learn from such anxiety and the misperceptions that cause it? By understanding what people think and how they perceive recycled water use, can we learn how to effectively communicate with them and put them at ease? Can we learn to respond more precisely to mitigate scientific skepticism? Or, should we just shove the use of recycled water down the public’s throats...because we know it is good for them?

There appears to be an instinctive mistrust of government when it comes to issues of public concern, such as potential environmental and health risks that may be associated with recycled water. This leads us to wonder if we can effectively manage people’s perceptions about irrigating food crops and school playfields, or even possibly drinking recycled water.

We have seen agencies do well or fail in the public opinion arena, largely depending on how they respond to community and individual perceptions. Data Instincts has participated in a variety of studies including focus groups, one-on-one interviews, public workshops and industry wide studies. One study that is currently underway examines how and why people react to the application of recycled water in their everyday life – from landscape irrigation, to the food they eat, and water they may eventually drink.

Understanding fears and perceptions about recycled water use has allowed many in our industry to better communicate and be responsive when implementing new projects and new uses. Why do perceptions matter? What is it that people are worried about? And why does this affect some communities but not others?

Some of what we have discovered is not obvious or logical. For instance:

1. People do not automatically trust the scientific premise that recycled water is safe. There is an inherent distrust of government on every level and a public cynicism regarding what scientists claim to be true.
2. Because of this, the “yuck” factor of waste water is not easily overcome.
3. And, yet, most people view recycled water use as an environmentally responsible thing to do.
4. There is currently no consistent, nationwide messaging regarding the use of recycled water. Consequently –
5. Perception from communities across the country varies greatly: Redwood City’s experience is vastly different than, say, Scotts Valley where parents helped to trench and lay pipes for recycled water because they considered it a green, environmentally responsible thing to do. Scotts Valley is only 44 miles from Redwood City. San Jose is only 24 miles away and they, too, have a very successful recycled water project there.

6. The Internet is not our friend. Articles, some loaded with misinformation, are readily available. They can create fear and gross misunderstandings of the science surrounding water and recycled water studies. They are often taken out of context and can cause project leaders and elected officials to quickly go on the defensive. Cryptosporidium, Giardia, pesticides and emerging contaminants are some of the scariest monsters in the public's closet.
7. People who build opposition become small time community heroes or legends rather quickly. They literally become important in their own minds...and sometimes...in the minds of others.
8. Lawsuits and/or opposition cause project delays, redesign, and increased project expenses. Plus projects are often forced to rethink their communications approach with the community: "Why do we need this project? Oh yeah, we are running out of water!"

Here are ten communications approaches we have found to be highly effective in combating some or all of the above problems.

1) The one-to-one approach

This is not a new approach, it is new to recycled water though. Peppers & Rodgers coined the term "one-to-one" marketing over ten years ago and it is used very successfully by Fortune 500 companies.

Our experience has shown that when you work with individuals you can mitigate things from spinning out of control and you can slowly build trust overtime.

This means you have to listen carefully and craft outreach messages that resonate with individuals and small groups versus delivering the same mass message to everyone.

2) CRM

Customer Relationship Management or, if you like, Community Relationship Management, or even Citizen Relationship Management. This is not new either, but we have been perfecting its use for recycled water projects for the last nine years.

CRM means that you as a group are going to consciously manage the relationship with several "one-on-ones" and small groups simultaneously. It is the opposite of mass marketing; it is a method of honoring personal relationships.

It involves managing the following types of information: conversations, who went to what meeting, what deals or promises were made. Because this can be a lot of information for one person or a group to remember through the course of a five year project, databases are an important component of the CRM approach.

3) Databases

Project databases can remember what was promised over time and obviously can be networked for the entire group and new contractors. We are now linking databases through Project Portals and providing unique views to different project stakeholders, including members like DHS, who need to view very specific project information, photos and designs. These contact manager databases contain more than mailing lists; they contain detailed information, photos, and drawings in addition to notations of conversations, meeting attendance and required notifications. They provide a valuable recorded history of a project's one-to-one relationships.

4) **In depth interviews (IDI)**

Based on our experience, the in-depth interview technique (versus focus groups or survey approaches) has proven itself to be the most appropriate and useful method for exploring sensitive and/or politically charged issues, such as recycled water usage. This is, at least in part, because the technique:

- keeps the discussion focused and eliminates grandstanding of one individual or “group think” effects, which are detrimental to free and open exchanges that lead to deeper insights of core issues involved, and
- allows the interviewing team to put a “face” on the project, gain trust, build relationships and “educate” interviewees about project specifics.

The IDI process allows us to get closer to opponents in a safe environment. As consultants, we are not the government agency: opponents tend to open up more, which allows us to start building a bridge.

The interview process has also served as a way to introduce the idea of using recycled water to the person or organization engaged. It allows for a free exchange of information and concerns without any sense of urgency or pressure to make a decision to use or not to use recycled water. Most of those interviewed develop an actionable desire to use recycled water. Because of the informal atmosphere, this occurs naturally without the use of traditional sales techniques. So it can be a great way to get commitment without twisting someone’s arm.

It is interesting to note, that in IDIs conducted across many projects we have been involved with over the last two years, two-thirds of respondents reported they had little or no initial concerns about recycled water and 92% believed using recycled water for landscape irrigation would have an overall positive effect on their community. That means that opponents are in the MINORITY, yet they have the loudest voice and, often, the biggest impact on the success or failure of a project.

5) **The Open House meeting - a different type of public meeting**

We have successfully used the Open House format in very tough situations. For this type of public meeting you invite people to a convenient location, set hours to allow participants to easily drop by on their way home from work or after dinner. Sign in attendees as they enter the room and let them know about your email broadcast system, and then direct them to one of the several team members available to discuss the project and answer questions.. People typically like to know what is going on in front of their houses or neighborhoods. This public meeting format allows them to see maps, schedules, and much more. You also may learn something your engineers did not know about specific locations.

People generally leave Open House meetings feeling their questions were answered, their concerns addressed and that they can connect a face to the project. The seeds of trust have been planted.

Key to this type of meeting is that there is no podium, no speeches, no PowerPoint, no coffee, no cookies and no opportunity for opponents to grandstand. Not surprisingly, opponents don’t like this format – they can’t bully their agenda and they can’t easily collect emails and phone numbers.

The only situation in which we use the typical presentational meeting format is for Scoping meetings, because they are required and you are recording comments. Otherwise, the Open House meeting can’t be beat.

6) **Email broadcasts**

Over the last five years email broadcasts have emerged, by far, to be the preferred method for people to receive project information. But we make sure we get permission first; and we keep them short, consistent and targeted to specific audiences.

We also receive messages from individuals that can be very helpful in “one-to-one” relationship building. Occasionally we receive very actionable emails or ones to which we can quickly respond to prevent the spread of misinformation.

We do not use a list serve approach because we want to avoid having opponents grab our lists and email messages to our recipients; a tactic they have been known to attempt.

7) Consistent proactive notifications

If you are consistently sending project messages that are honest and reliable, reasonable people will start to trust and believe your message over what your opponents are dispersing. But it takes time. Ultimately, the goal is for the city (or lead agency) to be the voice of the project, not the opponents.

8) Deploy a Call Center

Again a simple idea but grossly under utilized. Having a dedicated phone number, or even a “Project Call Center”, helps build trust and can also be a constant source of valuable information for the project team. Before the problem gets out of control, you can generate a response to misinformation you learn about from someone calling into the Call Center. Or you might learn from a caller that a contractor has cut a fiber optic cable. Knowing first is a huge benefit in managing public and media relations

9) Project-related Web site

Dedicated, project-specific Web pages provide a transparent process regarding all project information; this helps to build trust. In addition to project information, other water information that may affect the community – such as Urban Water Management Plans, water supply plans, recycled water projects, and water conservation practices – should be posted on the project Web site. This approach gives the community and stakeholders a broader understanding of the big picture so they can begin to appreciate how the project itself fits into the region’s overall water situation. In addition, project-specific Web pages are a convenient way for citizens to view all relevant notices, documents (such as newsletters), schedules and maps in a timely and responsive manner that meets community expectations for information about the project. This is obvious and easy; but generally poorly executed.

10) The power of project portals

In recent years, in partnership with Kennedy Jenks Consulting, we at Data Instincts have developed project-specific portals. Some of you are probably already using them. Portals are a great internal communications tool for large projects that have many team members from different companies.

From a public information and communications perspective, portals can help a project team remember promises made to a community. The combination of the project Web site and project Web portal is a powerful Community Relationship Management tool that helps to get the job responsibly done.

What other public relations specialists are doing to effectively communicate water reuse messages

In a study about mental models, Brent Haddad of UC Santa Cruz points out that recycled water is guilty by association. His research team is exploring how “associations” can be an “inherent impediment” to the positioning and the perception of recycled water. Highly treated wastewater isn’t actually yucky, bad, or dangerous; but it is associated with unpleasant images and smells. This “association” is referred to as “contagion.”

John Ruetten of Resources Trends stresses how building trust in a project is central to public acceptance. He and others have shown us how important it is to brand recycled water projects to build trust and create demand. We see this happening in Redwood City, where branding is driving customers to the utility. The city does not need to go out and sell their water. People want it. It has a perceived value. Trust can trump the “Yuck” in the Yuck factor; and branding can help build that trust.

In coordination with the City of San Diego, Katz & Associates has introduced several useful tools. At a 2006 WaterReuse conference in Los Angeles, Lesley Robins discussed the firm’s efforts to coordinate in-depth stakeholder meetings and workshops utilizing the American Assembly Process and speakers’ bureaus to help move community opinion toward the understanding that their water future may need to include augmenting their drinking water supply with highly treated recycled water. Those familiar with this effort know how tough it has been. But it has had a substantial effect on the evolving public perception and public discussion taking place in the San Diego area.

Positioning recycled water usage as “green”

Part of product branding is positioning. Ron Wildermuth of the Orange County Water District has taught us to be absolutely clear that we are talking about sewage water while pointing out the significance of water shortages in various regions of the country and the world. This connects people to a higher purpose or cause. The combination of environmental scarcity of water and sustainable practices has significant appeal, which begins to move the perception toward “doing the right thing” or “being Green.” The connection works for people because they can relate to it.

“Green” means several things, including sustainability, environmentally friendly and natural processes. In our culture, there is a sense that natural is better; that nature is inherently better or “right.” This point is being documented by Dr. Paul Rozin and his colleagues, along with Brent Haddad, in current studies associated with the WaterReuse Foundation.

Linda Macpherson with Ch2m Hill has made huge strides influencing perceptions with her work on NeWater in Singapore and in Cheyenne, Wyoming. These efforts position those projects as “Green” and involve bringing the whole community along in the process of understanding why and how they are using recycled water. Her outreach materials read, “We’re using water resources wisely by irrigating with recycled water.” Their slogan is, “The right water, the right uses, the right choice.”

Relative risk in the face of new worries

No matter how hard we work at this, there will always be new issues to address: a new compound, a new study, pharmaceuticals, emerging contaminants, pesticides, fish changing genders, etc. A recycled water consultant from Australia, Jenifer Simpson, points out in her latest book, *From Wasted-d-water to Pure Water*, that there are relative risks a person can consider. For example, “The risk of being killed in a car accident is a 1,000 times more likely than catching a treatable viral infection from recycled water.” (This is in Australia where she lives)

She goes onto to cite various other comparative risks, (such as 60,000 in ten million times more likely to have a stroke..., etc.). It becomes clear, that in spite of all of the potential risks a person faces in his or her daily life, a real threat related to recycled water is way down at the bottom of the list.

A recent Time magazine article points out that as a society we are focused and worried about the most improbable risks, while authentic risks lie below our radar. “Nearly twice as many Americans commit suicide each year as are murdered.” Or, “More than ten times as many die falling out of bed as from lightning strikes.” Descriptions of risks in this context should help communicate and mitigate fears associated with recycled water use.

This way of explaining relative risk is proving to be highly effective. We will likely see much more of it in the coming months and years. As science is able to see and measure smaller and smaller particles, the public needs a way to assimilate this information into their mental filing cabinet and weigh the impacts. Communicating relative

risk can be central to winning support and gaining understanding of complicated findings, such as pharmaceuticals in the water (any water) and what their long term impact may be.

The money effect

If people's health and safety fears are not enough, how about the impact funding these projects can have on a community? If you are a developer, you could be facing dramatically increased demand fees. If you are a ratepayer you might be facing double digit increases for the first few years that a recycled water project is being implemented. These increases, along with infrastructure replacement costs, force communities to make tough choices between critical community needs. If water supply is being increased, then people tend to be more empathetic. But if your project is not tied to increasing the water supply, if it is only to meet new regulatory requirements, then you will likely not receive a great deal of support.

Regardless, from a public perception and acceptance viewpoint, you will have to reach out, explain the problem, and solution, and then listen to the various stakeholder complaints, criticisms and objections. Be responsive where you can and, if possible, find a pathway that ratepayers and developers can potentially support, or at least understand.

Tying it all together

- If we listen and consider the various perceptions that people have, we can use that information to craft better communications and be more responsive. We know that people do not automatically trust the scientific premise that recycled water is safe. Therefore, we need to help them with associated imagery and provable facts.
- Most people already view recycled water use as an environmentally responsible thing to do. Those involved in water recycling can take some credit for this. But we must continue the effort.
- We need public education at young ages in regions where long-term water sources are imperiled – a national effort would be better because people relocate so frequently. As part of a national program, a universal symbol indicating usage of recycled water in various communities should be developed; something similar to what the aluminum can industry did with their recycling effort.
- The “Yuck” Factor of waste water is not easily overcome, so we need people to trust that we are utilizing “state of the art” science and technical processes to protect their health and safety. We need to communicate this in ways they can clearly understand and relate to. Understanding pharmaceutically active compounds will cause us the greatest consternation in the next few years.

Though it is true, people are not comforted by statements like the following from Mike Wehner of Orange County Water District: "The “analytical capability has outstripped our ability to understand what it means." And then you have the EPA regulators offering no clear guidelines yet because they are not sure either. They are still conducting their own studies. This is where the science does not really help us reassure the public, leaving them to wonder whom and what to believe.

Even though pharmaceuticals may be considered ubiquitous or even benign, try explaining what that means to a Hispanic mother of three who is worried about recycled water being used at her children's school. Even explaining it to the school district board can be challenging. Clearly we need more studies in Risk Assessment and then we need to effectively translate that information into every day language that the public can relate to and understand.

- Because people will insist on them *even though they are not technically needed*, it is possible we may see performance monitoring techniques deployed at some treatment plants in the near future and eventually becoming a regular practice in the coming years.

In closing, four things to remember

1. Unfortunately, people do NOT trust government – on any level. At all!
2. We, as a collective people, want information on demand, when it is convenient for us. Period! We live in a 24/7 world.

Because of these two traits:

- Public projects need to be responsive and provide full disclosure.
- If they do not, the public questions the very competency and integrity of the implementing agency and their contracted partners.

A reliable Public Outreach effort can be as vital to a project as a reliable recycled water system itself.

3. One person can undue your project making a one-to-one approach viable and relevant.
4. Community Relationship Management is something many projects do not even consider until it is way too late.

Remember those people who stayed up until 3:30 in the morning at a city council meeting? That was in Redwood City, California. In the end, they voted for using recycled water and they even declared that it is safe. Recycled water will be flowing there this spring, despite earlier misperceptions and fledging opposition.

Ag crops irrigated with recycled water from the Salinas Valley were eaten last night at dinner tables across America and probably at your own kitchen table. As we introduce recycled water to new communities, we already have a lot we can draw on regarding understanding public perceptions. And, with each new project and community, we continue to learn how we can better communicate and educate various audiences. We have an obligation to do this responsibly and as effectively as we can.

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