

Customer Education

All water utilities provide information routinely to the public that they serve – through billings, notices, and the requirements of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). In the past, information was provided through printed media only as bill stuffers, bills and articles in local newspapers. Today, substantially more information is shared via the web and related electronic formats. The challenge for any water utility is balancing the cost of printing and mailing with electronic posting, when neither format provides accurate information regarding how many customers read/access the information or act upon it. Utilities can only accurately track who is receiving water and who has paid their bills, and sometimes that can be a challenge as old accounts close and new ones start up.

It will always be the case that water utilities will need to and want to share information with its customers. Examples include when water rate increases occur and when drought conditions require changes in water use.

It is important that utilities develop an understanding of the cost of the information sharing and the benefits related to the effort. Although some information must be shared such as billing and SDWA mandated water quality reporting, water conservation education by the utility of the customers is substantially voluntary. Therefore, it is valuable to track the costs of educational efforts such that the utility can have an understanding of the benefit of those programs.

Many “typical” water conservation educational efforts with one-way communications cannot be shown to be particularly effective in reducing customer water demands without some type of integrated program. Therefore, this best management practice should incorporate a wide variety of informational and educational efforts and programs that water utilities can offer to their customers. All of these efforts can generally be classified as *social marketing* which is defined as: “The process of communicating with the public in an effort to change people’s behaviors for the benefit of an individual, group, or community” (Silva et. al. 2010). Typical water conservation information and education programs may include some or all of the following elements:

- School education programs (K-12)
- Bill stuffers
- Newsletters
- Media relations (news stories and press releases), direct mail and marketing materials
- Advertising campaigns (newspaper, radio, TV, web, billboards, theater slides, bus signs, etc.)
- Informational and educational websites
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Water festivals and public events
- Informational billing (customer feedback on water use patterns and leakage)
- Conservation kit give-aways
- Xeriscape demonstration garden

Note that for the AVC participants, the District will partner with local water utilities to reduce the cost of performing certain aspects of local customer educational programs – by supplying mailers, technical and media support, K-12 educational support, sponsoring water fairs, etc.

The American Water Works Association’s Water Research Foundation report, *Water Conservation: Customer Behavior and Effective Communication* (Silva et. al. 2010) provides a helpful checklist for developing any type of water conservation outreach campaign. Applying the principles and recommendations in this checklist to the extent possible will improve the effectiveness of water conservation education and information programs. Budget constraints will often set limits on the scope and breadth of an outreach campaign, but thinking strategically can help a utility make the most with limited funds.

From a local water efficiency perspective, customer education may be most effective in circumstances where

customers and water utility staff can exchange information face-to-face, and the results of the exchange can be tracked (meaning that changes in water use demand can be explicitly tracked comparing “before” and “after” water demands). Examples of face-to-face educational efforts that can be employed by water utilities include:

- Canvassing and messaging (using focus groups)
- Providing technical assistance training and workshops
- Conducting Audits

[Messaging and Surveys](#)

[Technical Assistance/Workshops](#)

[Audits](#)

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