

Developing a Water Conservation Public Awareness Program: A Guide for Utilities

Texas Water Development Board
www.twdb.state.tx.us



wateriq.org



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Introduction

Public awareness of water conservation is necessary to increase Texans' knowledge of water resources, water use, and the need to conserve water. Research has shown that the more Texans know about their water resources, the more likely they are to participate in water conservation programs.

Conservation is a cost-effective means of securing future water supplies for all Texans. Education, outreach, and public awareness can all be a part of your utility's water conservation management strategies.

This guide is meant to help your utility develop and implement an effective outreach program as part of your local efforts by making use of the mass media.

Your Utility's Goals

To develop an effective water conservation program, your utility should have a clear set of goals. Think about your utility's overall goals and how they correspond to the goals of the public awareness program to conserve water.

What does your utility want to accomplish by having a water conservation public awareness program? Is the goal to inform your customers about a new program or project you are offering, or is it to motivate your customers to change a behavior or attitude, or both?

For example, an informational goal might be that you want to tell your customers about a free program to give away faucet aerators that use less water in the home. To accomplish a motivational goal, your utility could hold a demonstration at a local fair to show your customers why the new faucet aerators will save time, money, energy, and water.

Having clearly defined goals in mind for the public awareness program will make it easier for your utility to measure the results of its program. Everything your utility can do to improve its public image will improve your ability to get desired results from your water conservation public awareness program.

Utility Water Resources

Your public awareness program should include your goals, a theme or logo, designated staff, a specific message, and materials. It is important to be consistent with your theme and remember that repetition helps reinforce the program in the minds of your customers.

If possible, designate a staff member as the public information contact so that the utility speaks through one person.

An important component of your utility's public awareness program is to inform your customers about the services you provide to the community.

Identify What Your Utility May Be Providing

- Does your utility have a water rate structure based on promoting conservation? How is it structured?
- What are the rules and regulations for water and wastewater permits?
- How is the water produced and distributed?
- How is the wastewater collected and treated?
- How does your utility provide maintenance and repair services?
- What kind of customer service does your utility provide?
- What conservation measures are in place?

Your utility will have specific areas you wish to address, and these are just a few examples of program development areas that can be used to determine the desired outcome of your public awareness program.

How to Work with Local Media

Many of the stories you see on the news or in the newspaper come from local sources. Getting your utility noticed by the local media will go a long way in promoting your public awareness program. There are many ways to reach your customers through the local media, and this guide will provide steps to achieve that goal.

Target Audience

Your utility will need to determine its target audience. The most likely audience will include your customers, utility staff, homeowners, commercial customers, government, and local organizations.

A utility can reach these people in various ways, including bill stuffers, office displays, handouts, advertisements, commercials, and public service announcements. Research regarding your target audience is helpful to determine how best to implement your public awareness program.

Getting an accurate profile of your target audience and understanding its interests, wants, and needs will help you focus your program. Research services can provide information about a target audience, but if using paid services is not in your budget, you can explore other ways to understand your target audience. Listen to the customers that do business with you. Where do most customers pay their bill? If it's on your Web site, consider updating the site with current water resource information. If most of your customers pay their bill by coming into your office, consider displaying useful literature inside the building.

Ways to Reach Your Audience

One of the most widely used ways to reach your audience is through the news media because of their effectiveness in delivering a message and in reaching a large number of people. Media include newspapers, radio, television, local cable channels, magazines, and Web sites.

Direct communication is often used as well. It may reach fewer people but, because it involves one-on-one communication, it can also be highly effective.

Social media are another resource that can be used to increase awareness and develop stronger customer relationships. This online communication tool allows for a two-way dialog between you and your customers.

Social media can take many forms including blogs, e-mail, instant messaging, video, and podcasts. This tool can be useful, especially if your utility has a strong online presence. Listed below are just a few examples of social media resources:

Blogs

- A blog is a short name for a Web log. It is an online journal that can be used to communicate with customers.

Podcast

- A podcast is a digital audio file that users can download and play back later. It can be a way to let others know how your utility works and what it can offer to the community.

Instant Messaging

- Instant messaging is a feature within many social networking sites that allows users to send messages to each other's in-boxes within the site or to chat in real time.

E-mail

- An electronic message or E-mail is the process of sending messages in electronic form. E-mail is a way for your customers to contact your utility and can also be used to distribute information, such as an electronic newsletter.

Social media trends are constantly changing, and you may need to determine which current tools best fit your utility's strategy and goals.

Mass Media Formats

Numerous mass media formats are available, including advertising and publicity. The difference between the two is that advertising is content you pay for (radio, television, or newspaper) and publicity (or public relations) refers to free content about your utility that appears in the media. Publicity happens when an article is published or when information you give to a reporter is featured in the news.

This guide provides just a brief overview of various formats your utility may wish to use.

News Coverage

Coverage in the news is an effective and free way to obtain publicity. Reporters are always looking for news to fill their pages or broadcasts. Packaging your messages as a news story can help distribute information to your customers at a low cost.

News coverage creates awareness, publicity, and recognition. It is a popular source of environmental information and can reach a large audience.

Newspapers

Keep an up-to-date list of all newspapers in your service area and supply the papers with news about your activities. Consider meeting with the editors and reporters before introducing your public awareness program and then regularly as the program continues. It will be to your utility's advantage to have your customers understand water issues and understand the benefits of the goals of your utility.

Radio and Television

Coverage on the radio or television can be a great opportunity for reaching large segments of the target audience. Broadcasters provide time for public service programming and may be eager to learn of a community's needs. An employee of the utility may be interviewed for a particular story, such as a free water-saving device that your utility is handing out to water customers.

Local television and radio stations are often looking for local interest stories. You could ask the station to run a public service announcement, or you could consider being interviewed on a station or a local morning show.

Statewide radio organizations such as the [Texas Farm Bureau](#) and [Texas Radio Network](#) may also be interested in your community efforts.

Magazines/Trade Journals

Both magazines and trade journals are good sources of information. Articles are more substantive and have more description than a newspaper story. Contact magazines and trade journals to find out what content they are planning to run for the next year. Before writing an article, contact the editor to see if there is any place your story might fit. Be aware that magazines tend to have rather long lead times, so contact them early (the lead time is the amount of time needed by a magazine to receive materials from you and turn them into a story for publication).

How to Reach Your Audience through the Media

There are many ways to reach your audience through the media, including using materials such as press releases, public service announcements, or advertising.

An introduction of the news media and the ways to contact the members of the media may also be useful.

The News Media

To familiarize yourself with the workings of a newspaper office or a television/radio station, keep in mind the following information when making contact:

- Editors usually choose which stories will be covered and assign reporters to write them.
- Larger newspapers may have multiple departments, each having a separate editor. A smaller paper may have the same person handling several jobs. Check with your local paper(s) to see who works in each area such as business, features, news, or photo departments.
- A television station will usually have two separate departments, news and promotions. For a public service announcement, contact the promotions department. For a story you want to pitch, contact the news department.
- Radio stations may have separate departments for news and promotions.
- Try to meet either the reporter or the editor before you need their services.

Media Relations

Establishing good contacts and developing a list of local media outlets can help you build a good relationship with the local media.

- Call your local newspaper(s) and find out which reporter covers utility or environmental news.
- Consider hosting a media day. Invite local reporters and community leaders to visit your utility and hear a brief summary of your operations, activities, or programs.

Pitching Your Story

Pitching your story is another way to sell your story to the news media. If your utility is about to begin a new outreach program or introduce a new community resource, contact your local media outlets and let them know about it. A reporter may be interested in covering the story. The story should

- be news worthy,
- fit into the specific format used by your local media outlets, and
- interest a majority of readers or viewers.

A Successful Pitch

Taking a few key steps will improve your chance of delivering a successful pitch. Remember to contact the correct editor or reporter who might be interested in your story and be able to do something about it. If possible, find out which method of contact is preferred; some reporters respond to an e-mail or fax, while others prefer a telephone call.

Find out the deadlines for a particular media outlet and avoid calling right before a deadline.

When speaking with the reporter or editor, be accurate and brief. Identify yourself and your utility, and explain why you think they will be interested in your story. If appropriate, remind them of any dates or times, ask whether they need more information, and whether you should call back later for a response.

You should also offer to send any written materials, including bios, news releases, photos, or fact sheets that they may need.

News Releases/Media Advisories

A news release, also called a press release, is a common way to distribute messages to the news media. A news release is usually a one- or two-page description of news about your project.

Include all important information in the beginning of the news release:

- First paragraph should include who, what, when, where, and how.
- Second paragraph should explain why the program is important to the community, when it started, and other appropriate information.
- Third paragraph can include other miscellaneous information about your utility.

Send out news releases for a story such as

- an event (conference, seminar, or similar activity),
- a new marketing program, or
- research results that are interesting.

Rules for Writing News Releases

- Make the news release no longer than one or two pages.
- Type it on your letterhead.
- Include the date/time the news is to be released (for example, “For Immediate Release,” or “For Release July 1, 20xx”).
- Have a contact name and all contact information on the top of the release (include phone number and e-mail address).
- Choose a headline that summarizes the point and is interesting.
- End the news release using one of the three end marks: “-30-” or “-end-” or “# # #”.
- Include photographs if appropriate.

Distributing the Release

- Send the release to a specific person. Call the news or assignment desk if you don’t know who handles releases.
- Check ahead of time for the media outlet’s deadlines, and provide the release at least one day before that deadline.
- Releases can be faxed, e-mailed, mailed, or hand-delivered.

Fact Sheets

A fact sheet, or backgrounder, is a document similar to a press release, but it contains general information about your utility.

Feature Stories

A feature story is usually of interest to the public and helps project a favorable attitude toward increasing awareness of your cause. Feature stories may include

- water conservation education efforts,
- the need for water conservation because of increased population, or
- information about a demonstration garden or similar project.

Photos

Current photos of an event or newsworthy story can help make an article more meaningful.

Media Advisory

A media advisory briefly announces a press conference or event. It should include

- what the news conference is about,
- where is it being held,
- what time it will take place,
- who will be speaking, and
- what types of photo or interview opportunities will be available.

The rules for a media advisory are much the same as those for a news release.

How to Hold a News Conference or Event

News conferences or events should be planned carefully. You can publicize many programs through a news conference, including the start of a new program or service, recognition of local businesses and people for their efforts to conserve water, or the release of major information about your utility or program.

If your utility is holding a news conference, keep the following in mind:

- Send a media advisory before the event, but don't give away too much information.
- Make follow-up calls to remind media about the conference.
- Provide any information, such as a media kit to local media that could not attend the event.
- Take photos to send out later, and if possible, send with media kit to local media.
- Send thank you letters.

Media Kit

A media kit contains information regarding the event or program. It should include

- a news release,
- fact sheets,
- business cards,
- biography of presenters or people involved with the program, and
- background information regarding the utility.

Web Sites

A well-developed Web site with accurate and timely information can be a good information resource for your audience. A Web site helps to establish your presence in the community. It can help to

- provide basic business information and customer service,
- heighten public awareness, and
- make changing information available quickly.

Videos

Videos can be used to talk about specific subjects at length and allow the utility to have control over the content. A video may be used for on-air coverage on a cable station or shown on your Web site.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

PSAs can be free to air and can also reach a large audience. PSAs are brief messages broadcast over radio or television but are not advertising. They are offered by cable TV, broadcast stations, and print outlets on a non-paid basis as information in the public interest.

The messages come from nonprofit community groups such as branches of city, county, or state government or other education or social organizations.

Find out if your local media outlets accept PSAs, and send any you may have. Consider developing a PSA if your utility does not have one.

The message in a PSA should be short and simple. Be sure to keep within the time restrictions of the station to whom you are submitting the PSA. Usually a PSA comes in lengths of 10, 30, or 60 seconds. The PSA should be of a professional quality.

Advertising

Paid advertising may be necessary to provide important information and to persuade behavior or attitude changes. Advertising should establish the interest of the utility in the welfare of the community. One advantage of placing a paid ad in a newspaper or on a radio or television program is that your utility's message will be exactly as you intend. Prices will vary with the size of the station and newspaper.

Television advertisements provide a high impact and show the ability to demonstrate a behavior. Advertisements should establish the interest of the utility in the welfare of the community. For example, your utility can advertise that you are having a display at the local county fair to distribute free faucet aerators.

Paid advertising gives you control over the time and content of the message and enables you to reach target audiences more precisely.

Cable

Cable advertising may be a lower cost alternative to advertising on broadcast television and has many of the same qualities as broadcast television. And because cable networks are targeted to specific demographics, your message is more likely to reach your audiences.

Direct Communication

Besides using mass media, you can communicate to your target audience using other tools and activities. Many public awareness programs use high-visibility materials such as exhibits, workshops, events, brochures, newsletters, posters, or bill stuffers.

These promotional materials create an opportunity to increase exposure to your message.

Exhibits, Conferences, Workshops, and Presentations

Various public venues give you a way to distribute materials and talk individually with participants. A water conservation exhibit may be held at an education environmental fair or energy trade show, for example.

Displays

A display can be used at events, conferences, or meetings to help reach a large audience. The display can help promote your message and help attract an audience.

Brochures

Distributing brochures about water conservation is a good way to educate the public about water resources and ways to conserve water. Brochures allow you to communicate information and facts that would be too lengthy for paid advertising and also allow you to provide additional information if requested.

Bill Stuffers

Bill stuffers are a useful way to promote water conservation. They are usually inexpensive to produce and can be placed in the same envelope as the bill.

Posters

Posters can be used in many public places or distributed to schools and area businesses.

Newsletters

Newsletters can contain specific information and can be sent out anytime. An electronic newsletter can be developed through your Web site and be e-mailed to customers that wish to sign up for additional information.

Billboards

Billboards can also reach a large audience, but the message must be concise and memorable to be effective.

Tracking Media Coverage

It can be helpful to track media coverage. It allows you to

- follow relationships between your utility and individual media outlets/reporters,
- monitor what is being said about your utility,
- find out if additional information is needed, and
- evaluate your public awareness campaign.

Monitoring Services

The physical number of clippings (articles) or videos in which your utility's name appears is a simple way to measure the success of your public awareness program. This information allows you to gauge the number of stories that were generated from your efforts. Many subscription and clipping services are available to track media coverage for anything published or broadcast.

Free monitoring services are also available, such as [Google Alerts](#), which will search for specific items on the Web and e-mail the results to you. Tracking your media coverage is an important tool to use when measuring results of your public awareness program goals.

Closing Thoughts

This guide is meant to provide you with information to help you start your own outreach program, give you some new ideas, or expand your existing program.

We hope this guide will encourage you to increase public awareness of water conservation to save existing water resources and ensure the availability of water for future generations.

Even if you start with a small program and limited local resources, the most important goal of your program is to educate your customers about their water resources and the importance of water conservation.

Texas Water Development Board Resources

TWDB water conservation staff can provide services to help cities, utilities, and districts establish effective water-efficient conservation programs. We offer agricultural and municipal water conservation materials, leak detection and water loss audit assistance, and public awareness and education programs through the Water Conservation Division. <http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/assistance/conservation/consindex.asp>

Water IQ

TWDB has a water conservation public awareness program, Water IQ. Your utility may be interested in using Water IQ as your public awareness program or as a resource to complement your existing local and regional efforts.

Water IQ provides a broad level of outreach and offers an easy-to-identify brand, a variety of materials, and a network of groups and communities dedicated to educating Texans about water conservation. If your utility is interested in learning more about the opportunities available by using Water IQ, please visit the Water IQ Web site at <http://wateriq.org/wiwq/index.htm>.

The [Water IQ](http://wateriq.org/wiwq/index.htm) Web site can help provide your customers with information about local water conservation efforts. After customers enter their local ZIP code or locate your utility by name in a drop-down menu, they are redirected to your utility's water conservation page. Your utility will be able to take advantage of any promotional material that already has the Water IQ service mark or the address to the Web site. This link gives your customers another option to find information about water conservation within your Web site.



If your utility does not have a Web site, customers are directed to statewide water conservation information.

If your utility would like to use Water IQ, please contact TWDB at www.wateriq.org for a Water IQ User Agreement and Usage Guidelines.

State Water Plan

The 2007 State Water Plan was created to ensure that Texas has water for the future. Working together, Texans can achieve the plan's goal: dependable, safe, and affordable water for the future during times of drought.

Sixteen regional water planning groups review water use projections and water availability in dry or drought-of-record conditions. When a water need is identified, the planning groups recommend water management strategies to meet the need. The compiled information from the regional water plans and other sources is used to develop the state water plan. <http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/wrpi/swp/swp.htm>

Literature

Brochures are available for Water IQ and other programs. The materials are available for free in limited quantities and for a nominal price for larger quantities. Ordering information is available on our Web site.

<http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/publications/publications.asp>

Education

K–12 school materials are also available through TWDB. These resources include units developed for specific age groups and range from coloring books for younger children to complete curricula for older students, with teachers' guides and Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) guidelines. Interactive Web games and lessons are also featured. <http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/kids/index.htm>

Resources to Identify Local Media

Online search tools can help you identify your local media contacts:

Congress.org

You can enter your ZIP code to view a list of local media sources in your area as well as contact information: <http://www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/media/>

Media Facts

You can learn about the strengths and weaknesses of various media formats and profiles of competitive media at the Radio Advertising Bureau Web site:
<http://www.rab.com/public/MediaFacts/mediafacts.cfm>

The **Public Service Advertising Research Center** is an online library dedicated to public service advertising: <http://www.psaresearch.com/>

Cable Systems Directory provides an online directory that allows you to find local cable systems in your market:
www.thecab.tv/main/cablenetworks/systemdirectory/index.shtml

On the Radio.Net has an online directory for local radio stations:
<http://www.ontheradio.net/>

Acknowledgments and Additional Resources

Some of the information provided in this guide has been adapted from materials found in the following resources:

The **Texas Commission on Environmental Quality** provides information about drinking water and its availability in Texas.
<http://www.tceq.state.tx.us>

The **United States Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) is the national agency charged with protecting the nation's water resources. The EPA provides information about protecting your local water source as well as information about pollutants and preventing contamination.
<http://www.epa.gov/eftpages/water.html>

The EPA launched its **WaterSense** program in 2006. WaterSense educates consumers in making smart water choices that save money and maintain high environmental standards without compromising performance.

<http://www.epa.gov/watersense>

Texas Nursery & Landscape Association serves the nursery growers and landscapers of Texas. This Web site provides statewide regulatory information regarding water use as well as links to Texas Superstars, native plant varieties that are strong performers in Texas' extreme weather conditions.

<http://www.txnla.org/>

Texas Urban Landscape Guide

The Texas Urban Landscape Guide is a resource of science-based information related to the design, installation, and maintenance of WaterWise landscapes for the principal plant adaptability regions in Texas.

<http://urbanlandscapeguide.tamu.edu/>

Texas SmartScape provides tips on how to save money on water bills and maintain a beautiful yard.

<http://www.txsmartscape.com/>

The **Alliance for Water Efficiency Resource Library** has a searchable online library for water conservation and efficiency.

<http://www.allianceforwaterefficiency.org/resource-library/default.aspx>

The **American Water Works Association** is the authoritative resource on safe water and provides knowledge, information, and advocacy to improve the quality and supply of water.

<http://www.awwa.org>