



## Building Effective Communications and Public Relations Strategies for POTWs

A NACWA White Paper

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an effort to bolster its communication and outreach with the general public and the media, the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) surveyed its members about their public relations capabilities, needs, and goals. The idea was not only to gather information on resources devoted to public relations and outreach, but also to highlight successes and identify areas where agencies can work together and harness their collective knowledge to develop and deliver a strong message about the critical work they perform every day protecting the nation's health and its waters. That survey generated valuable information that NACWA, through its Communications and Public Relations (CPR) Committee, used to produce this *Public Relations White Paper (PR White Paper)*.<sup>1</sup> This document will help NACWA member agencies build upon their own public relations strategies and provide a way to disseminate relevant information about PR successes with other utilities.

The detailed member survey, conducted using the *CleanWater Central* database (<http://www.cleanwatercentral.org/>), yielded some illuminating responses regarding the variety of challenges and similarities in successful outreach initiatives by the 40-plus responding clean water agencies.

In addition to being an effective primer to utility PR professionals and managers regarding the PR/advocacy capabilities and successful strategies of NACWA member agencies, the *White Paper* serves as a roadmap for more effectively leveraging member agency outreach capabilities to ensure the success of local, state, regional, and national advocacy priorities in the clean water arena.

This *White Paper* offers direction for both broad-based concerns as well as more detailed initiatives that have yielded successful results at the local level. Broad issues include how utilities can better explain the benefits of wastewater treatment to their service communities. More narrowly tailored issues include how to employ specific tactics – such as bill stuffers and town hall-style meetings – to accomplish targeted agency advocacy objectives. In turn, NACWA and the CPR Committee are extremely interested in how these successful strategies can be employed to affect national advocacy goals.

### Survey Responses Shed Light on Five Key Categories

A review of the survey responses reveals that the data can be classified into five overarching sections: 1) internal agency PR capabilities; 2) successful media strategies; 3) outreach to the community/customer base; 4) words that work; and 5) consideration of recommended actions for NACWA next steps.

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<sup>1</sup> A special thanks is extended to the following leaders of the NACWA Communications and Public Relations Committee for their dedication to continuously improved outreach efforts and for reviewing both the survey and this *White Paper*: Jamie Samons, Public Relations Manager, Narragansett Bay Commission, Providence, R.I., and Chair of the CPR Committee; Chris Kosinski, Public Affairs Officer, Anchorage Water & Wastewater Utility, Anchorage, Alaska and Committee Vice Chair; Steve Frank, Public Information Office, Metro Wastewater Reclamation District, Denver, Colorado; and Nancy Barylak, Public Relations Manager, Allegheny County Sanitary Authority, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Section I makes it clear that, for several reasons, a one-size-fits-all approach to an agency's communications program cannot work. For example, survey responses demonstrated the breadth of NACWA member agencies' PR budgets (salaries not included). They ranged from a low of \$1,000 to a high of \$1.6 million. The majority of the responding agencies' PR budgets ranged from \$40,000 to \$150,000. Despite this vast budget disparity, however, many agencies have full-time PR staff with a wealth of experience that can be shared to help all NACWA public agency members meet their advocacy objectives.

For example, one common element of successful outreach efforts, regardless of budgetary means, was the need for strong internal communications between the agency's PR and technical staff. In short, outreach efforts can increase awareness of an agency's priorities; however, the information shared must be technically accurate as well as persuasive to gain the necessary support.

Section II of the *White Paper* discusses effective media strategies that public agencies are using to obtain positive attention for their programs. Survey responses for media-related activity showed how utilities, small and large alike, face common challenges largely associated with general perceptions of the functions of clean water agencies. The survey points to a common frustration inherent in educating members of the media. Wastewater treatment agencies are neither "polluters" nor "industry," but are public servants performing a public good cleaning the nation's waters under the Clean Water Act, yet many reporters do not seem to realize this fact.

As one respondent noted, the most difficult roadblock to getting positive media attention is "convincing [journalists] our projects are critical infrastructure improvements with long lasting value to the community." Or, as another respondent stated, "the wastewater industry is generally ignored with respect to our drinking water counterparts . . . because it is not seen as part of the water or life cycle."

The *White Paper* discusses both local techniques as well as the clear need for national message consistency to overcome common misperceptions and to better position the wastewater treatment community to be viewed as the true environmentalists and protectors of public health.

Section III of the *White Paper* outlines the survey respondents' views on how NACWA can continue to provide useful PR tools to help deliver the message about the critical work clean water utilities do every day. Most respondents said NACWA should be the key organization for ensuring message consistency on priority issues. NACWA was also seen as the critical link toward heightening public and media understanding of the role publicly owned treatment works (POTWs) play, which survey respondents acknowledged as the first step in any successful advocacy program.

Section IV offers insight into the messages that individual POTWs find resonate with their respective media and customer bases. This section underscores the importance of inter-agency collaboration; specifically, respondents expressed eagerness to draw upon the successes of colleagues at other agencies on matters of local and national advocacy as well as message development and delivery. To borrow a marketing model, respondents supported the concept of "branding" the work that POTWs do every day to achieve the goals of the Clean Water Act.

The final section of the *White Paper* discusses potential future activity for NACWA in the PR arena. This section does not arrive at any conclusions but opens the door for discussion among CPR Committee members and the full NACWA membership as to what types of initiatives may be helpful to POTWs.

## I. CLEAN WATER AGENCY PR CAPABILITIES

The survey points out that most responding POTWs have staff dedicated to PR with significant experience in the field. These professionals offer a unique resource for shared information on successful PR strategies and, as discussed further in the Next Steps section, an exceptional resource to help develop messages and initiatives to achieve national advocacy goals.

Significantly, 28 of the 43 responding agencies — more than 65 percent — have at least one full-time employee dedicated solely to PR. At a minimum, this demonstrates the importance the nation's POTWs place on communicating to the public the critical services they provide on a daily basis. Assuming these numbers broadly reflect NACWA's membership, the Association has access to, *at a minimum*, 200 full-time PR professionals. It should also be noted that 15 agencies had no full-time PR person on staff, and that represents a gap this report can help to address.

This number, however, grows when one considers that many facilities have more than one full-time employee dedicated to PR. The largest PR staff of a respondent utility was 28. On average, responding agencies reported three full-time PR staff. Again, extrapolating from these figures, NACWA's public agency members would include more than 600 full-time PR professionals — a valuable resource that can and must be better harnessed to activate the public on behalf of local, regional, and national clean water priorities.

Perhaps of greater importance than the sheer number of full-time PR employees, however, is the depth of experience they bring to the table. The majority of the primary PR staff for public agencies has more than 10 years of experience. Just under half of these primary PR employees have more than 21 years of PR experience.

In addition to the impressive statistics regarding the broad experience of PR professionals, many POTWs have also made a strong financial commitment to their outreach programs. While outreach budgets of responding agencies ranged from \$20,000 to \$1.6 million, the majority of the respondents had budgets of \$100,000 or more, with many in the \$200,000-\$600,000 range. Additionally, several of the responding agencies that did not have full-time PR professionals still had solid PR budgets, indicating that some agencies contract out these functions.

The most fundamental question for the remainder of this *White Paper* is how to leverage the vast PR skill and resources of the Association's member agencies to maximize the effectiveness of local, regional, and national advocacy efforts. The survey revealed that responding agencies offered answers to this question that required separate strategies for media advocacy and direct community/ratepayer advocacy.

## II. SUCCESSFUL MEDIA ADVOCACY

In an aggregate sense, the Nation's POTWs have both the experienced staff and the resources to reach out to the media and their communities in an effective manner. The survey, however, showed that significantly more can be done to organize media outreach efforts to further municipal and national advocacy objectives.

The survey also revealed that, overall, PR staff efforts were more highly focused on direct communications with ratepayers and the community than on proactively seeking positive media stories. Significantly, POTW responses detailed that while voicing their point of view with the media was met with considerable success, too often these media efforts were reactive in nature —

usually responding to a problematic or crisis-related event. As noted above, the media often do not recognize the value and necessity for sound wastewater treatment services in their communities, but they do recognize the need for good drinking water. Also of interest is the view that often direct outreach to ratepayers and the community is perceived as an arena where the message can be more easily controlled and the outcomes often more favorable.

### ***Broad Media Market Access, Experience Base Offer Unique Opportunity for Outreach***

The survey asked clean water agencies to quantify the size of their media markets. The responses yielded large numbers in terms of an agency's potential access to multiple print, radio, and television outlets. Even more striking was the population that these media outlets could reach. On an aggregate basis, an organized and successful media campaign by NACWA's public agency members could reach the majority of the U.S. population. This is a vital point to keep in mind as NACWA and its members develop next steps in the PR arena (see Section V).

In fact, the ability to access media is not just an issue of access to markets but also of experience. Of the 42 survey responses, 37 had experience writing news releases on a regular basis. Only 28 of 42, however, had written editorials while 27 of 42 had the budgets and resources to place paid ads for educational/advocacy purposes. The least used of the media tools were editorial board meetings — only 22 of the 42 respondents conducted them.

These statistics, however, do not fully depict what the vast majority of PR professionals in the POTW community are doing on the media front. In additional comments, virtually all respondents noted that the best way to deal with the media is through *direct, frequent, and personal* contact with reporters. Many responses stated that journalists do not have an understanding of what a treatment plant does on a daily basis or about the history and the goals of the Clean Water Act. Only person-to-person contact can ensure an objective story.

### ***How to Ensure a Positive Story and Deal with Unfair Reporting***

Surprisingly, the majority of respondents (30 of 42) said the media did a good job of covering their utility fairly. A closer reading of the responses, however, made it clear that the devil was in the details. Respondents noted that most of the stories were meant to highlight or stir up controversy on issues such as sewage spills, compliance problems, road closures, service breaks, basement backups, rate increases, and odor problems. As one response indicated, "unfortunately, the old saw that 'good news is not news' remains true, as does its opposite, 'if it bleeds, it leads'."

The media tended to write positively about agency activity in stories related to two types of initiatives only: innovative projects to curb an identified problem or expensive and major construction projects that are impressive simply because of their scope and cost.

When asked about avoiding negative stories, or dealing with a reporter who casts POTWs in a negative light, the responses all focused on ramping up personal contact and educational efforts with the specific reporter in question. Only one or two responses suggested ignoring or alienating that reporter. One respondent voiced the general consensus well: "It is important to keep trying. Alienating a reporter is never the answer. If necessary, talk to the editor. They don't want to lose you as a cooperating agency either." Or, as was nicely stated in one response, "one just has to keep trying. We keep explaining what we do and how we do it, what our constraints are, and the underlying science or other practical considerations."

Many of the responses also noted the strategic need for including technical staff in discussions with reporters, especially when a reporter has a demonstrated track record of being difficult or

biased. While the PR professional can be seen as apt to “spin” a particular issue, reporters tend to put more credence in the word of a scientist or engineer.

Also, some agencies found that inviting reporters to sit in on webcasts or seminars that deal with the nuts and bolts of a particular issue about which the journalist is inquiring can be very helpful in ensuring a sound story. As one agency noted, reporters who write negative stories generally are “not hostile, just uninformed, so we have to work extra hard to simplify stories and provide a broader, more regionalized context.”

It is this notion of simplifying stories and providing a broader regional or national context that led many of the responses to voice the view that NACWA might be able to play a larger role in drafting editorials and short informational pieces to provide to reporters that will help advance local, regional, and national clean water priorities. The availability of a very talented and professional group of PR staff, coupled with their unique ability to access diverse and key media markets, certainly demands significant discussion by the CPR Committee as NACWA develops its next steps in the PR arena.

### III. CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY/CUSTOMERS

#### *Going “Directly” to the Public*

The survey revealed that many POTWs prefer, when possible, to bypass the media and take their issues directly to the public. As one response noted, “Our media do not give a lot of coverage and so we produce a community report for residents and business, sent out one or two times a year.” In fact, many more agencies engaged in a wider variety of direct customer outreach as opposed to media outreach.

For example, 39 of 42 agencies conduct facility tours for citizens, school children, and/or professional groups. Thirty-eight of 42 responding agencies conduct VIP tours for council members, legislators, and other influential groups; 37 of 42 groups produce and distribute informational brochures to their customers; 35 of 42 conduct face-to-face outreach at community fairs or similar venues or events; 34 of 42 provide speakers for community groups; 29 of 42 have “regular interaction” with citizen advisory groups; 27 of 42 place paid advertisements in community media for reasons other than recruiting or announcing requests for proposals; and 24 of 42 produce and distribute videos for their customers.

While at times the media may seem like the first place to begin one’s advocacy campaigns, clearly the survey points to direct community outreach as perhaps the more favored approach. When asked hypothetically “If you have found that your media are not responsive, do you access the ratepayers directly to gain support?” Exactly half answered “Yes.” Some of the “Noes,” however, said that both forms of outreach were inseparable or that often their agencies put their resources into direct outreach instead of media campaigns.

As one respondent stated, “More direct interaction with the area . . . has proven to be the best course of action.” As another respondent found, “For our most important messages, we do this [direct outreach], along with our media coverage, regardless of how well things are covered.” Obviously the degree to which utilities do full media and community outreach concurrently depends in large part on staffing and budget constraints.

There was a broad acknowledgment, however, that outreach to the media could result in no story at all or a negative article. And many respondents agreed that sharing innovative strategies to

access the public directly would be one of the most useful activities of the PR Committee. Respondents confirmed the idea that sharing these successful methods would result in other POTWs emulating them and would help ensure the success of shared advocacy goals.

### ***Successful POTW Outreach Methods . . . The Tried and True***

A handful of successful outreach strategies being used by POTWs were consistently echoed in numerous responses. The overall message from respondents was clear – do not hide from potential or likely problems, but get out in front of them and prepare to educate the affected community. The more proactive a utility can be the better. The strategies being used most frequently by POTW PR staff include:

- 1) leaving door-hangers on the doorknobs of customers who will be impacted by a proposed activity;
- 2) holding “open houses” or public information meetings prior to and during a project;
- 3) offering facility tours to targeted/affected communities as well as more broadly to area students;
- 4) providing a newsletter to all customers on a regular basis;
- 5) maintaining an “Inquiry and Complaint” database that allows for one-on-one contact with customers who have specific questions and concerns;
- 6) sending direct mail to customers on specific issues – sometimes as bill stuffers or as stand-alone mailings; and
- 7) ensuring a POTW’s website is used as a method to convey priority messages to customers.

### ***Innovative Outreach Strategies and Their Beneficial Results***

While these strategies are the most used direct advocacy/outreach methods, other more creative examples also merit mention. In one area where water conservation was a major issue, an agency offered a showerhead exchange program, demonstrating its role as a proactive public steward. One agency every year ensures that the state governor proclaims the third week of April “Wastewater Worker Recognition Week.”

Another agency detailed its successful grease collection day initiative, which takes place the Friday after Thanksgiving. In this example, the collected grease was recycled into biodiesel by a local company and offered a unique opportunity to explain to customers the harmful nature of FOG [fats, oils and grease], which result in pipe blockages. This activity also underscores the importance of resource reuse.

Additionally, one agency noted that it created specific rules for student groups visiting their agency that require one adult be present for every five children. This guarantees that in addition to local children, parents and teachers are also learning about the important work being done by the clean water agency. These examples are but a few of the many contained in the survey, and NACWA encourages other members to read through the survey results for additional information.

These examples demonstrate opportunities available to the POTW community for developing vital messages that portray treatment plant employees as true public servants. These efforts also



provide the dual advantage of garnering positive media attention and public buy-in through an entirely proactive approach.

#### IV. WORDS THAT WORK

Question 14 of the survey asked agencies “What words/phrases work in getting the public/media to understand what your facility does?” The responses were telling in terms of both the strategic thinking involved in crafting messages and often in the difference of opinion on what constitutes a resonant message.

##### ***Avoid Using Words that Don’t Work***

Some of the comments focused on avoiding the common pitfalls when creating successful messages. These include avoiding the use of acronyms — so beloved in our industry — like TMDLs or UAAs. In line with this, there was an overwhelming consensus that technical terminology be avoided whenever possible. As one respondent noted, “We try to express what we are doing in everyday terms. Instead of cubic feet of concrete, we say city blocks of sidewalk. . . .” As another respondent noted, “We talk about raw sewage overflows and not CSOs.”

##### ***Using the Words that Do Work***

Many specific terms were also offered as “Words that Work” for several utilities. Indeed, there was a general consensus that stating the facts — such as the main goal of clean water agencies is the “treatment of sewage” — was the best bet. Most responses noted that people understand the term sewage and the fact that POTWs are making it cleaner and safer is resonant. Other terms that were listed by several respondents included:

- Stewards of the environment
- Environmentally sound program
- Responsible to ratepayers
- Clean water providers
- Investing in the future
- Treatment plants remove pollutants
- Clean water is a sound investment
- Fish friendly and cost-conscious

Several respondents noted that reporters and the public understand the role of POTWs best when put in naturalistic and simple terms. For example, one agency found that people understood what they do best by stating that “we are committed to providing clean water through a natural process just like a river, only we speed up the process.” Another said that “We clean the water after you use it and return it to the lake.” Clearly, the more experienced PR professionals understand that people and often even the media do not even understand the basics of what a POTW does and that these types of very basic statements can often be overlooked — usually to the detriment of utility PR initiatives.

##### ***A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words***

One response made a very sound point that in the PR arena, a picture can be worth a thousand words. This agency uses pictures in its PR documents to demonstrate the specific problem and does not seek to hold any punches. But the agency also uses pictures to show the result. As an example, jars of treatment plant influent and effluent are photographed to illustrate to reporters and the public exactly what clean water agencies do. In this case, the visual impact of the dirty water and the clean water expressed succinctly what might take hours of discussion about processes and permit limits.

## V. NACWA NEXT STEPS

There were many excellent ideas put forward in the PR Survey, and this section lays some of these out for future discussion by the CPR Committee and broader NACWA membership. The issue of “where do we go from here?” was summed up nicely in one response:

“Our business needs to understand that when a neighboring utility is under attack, our utility is too by implication. Because of the structure of the industry, however, we tend to jump into the foxhole and say, ‘Whew, glad that isn’t me being shot at!’” Many of the comments viewed NACWA’s role as ensuring that POTWs work themselves free of this “bunker mentality” and, instead, perceive themselves as a well-organized group that can influence policymaking decisions.

In planning a coordinated response, NACWA will continue to work with like-minded organizations and coalitions to advance shared goals. Several of the survey respondents and CPR Committee members noted that NACWA should continue its partnerships – for example, its support for WEF’s “Water is Life and Infrastructure Makes It Happen” program and the important work of the National Biosolids Partnership. NACWA’s CPR Committee should use existing materials from these coalition efforts rather than waste valuable staff and time duplicating these resources. Likewise, NACWA and its member utilities should use their influence within these coalition efforts to ensure the development and dissemination of useful materials.

As set out in many survey comments, the role of unifying POTWs can be done by taking several key steps. These include: 1) expanding the role of the CPR Committee in developing messages that can be used by all utilities in both local and national advocacy campaigns; 2) being more proactive and include its membership in developing and rolling out template articles for publication in local press; 3) monitoring and reporting to the Committee on national stakeholder groups that are providing support and/or opposition to the POTW community’s objectives; 4) setting up a national speakers’ list of members that can act as media resources and spokespeople on key issues; and 5) offering training and educational workshops for PR professionals.

One concern that several POTWs pinpointed was the need to explain the national nature of the financial challenges POTWs are facing at the local level. As one respondent stated:

“Rates are becoming a real concern nationally. For NACWA to compose data on how escalating costs are not just a local problem, but are a real industry concern would be helpful. Long-term debt, debt service costs, personnel costs, benefits, chemical and electrical costs are all rising faster than inflation. . . .” This sentiment – that NACWA could play the role of, as one respondent put it, a “coordinating agency” on the PR front – was expressed in the context of other issues as well, including biosolids, FOG [fats, oil and grease], and others.

Again, this *White Paper* should focus the Association’s internal discussion on how the CPR Committee and NACWA can best serve the membership in sharing information and providing tools that will help maximize the success of POTW advocacy initiatives. As a start, if you would like to join the Committee or if you have ideas on how NACWA can better serve your agency in the PR arena, please contact Susie Bruninga, NACWA’s Director of Public Affairs at [sbruninga@nacwa.org](mailto:sbruninga@nacwa.org) or at 202/833-3280.