Communicating During a Crisis

*LCFWSA Raw Water Main Break, October 2016*
*GenX, June 2017 – Ongoing*
Background

• Producer, CNN (Reliable Sources, Political Programming)
• Planning Editor, WUSA*9, Washington, DC
• 12+ Years as Media Relations Manager, Director
• 3+ Years: Lead spokesperson
• Director, Customer Relations & Communications
• 4+ Years: Chief Communications Officer
• Founded
Before A Crisis: Proactive Communications

• You actually prepare for crisis communications EVERY SINGLE DAY

• Why? If you proactively talk to your customers on a consistent basis, it builds trust. Trust is VITAL during crises.

• There’s fresh proof communication strengthens ratepayer relationships: J.D. Power 2017 Water Utility Survey. 40k customers from 87 utilities.

  • Customer satisfaction scores were 15% higher with positive news coverage
  • Scores were 20% higher when they recalled receiving ONE proactive utility communication in last 3 months
  • Frequent customer communication nets best results: Customers who recall receiving SIX or more communications gave 33% higher scores
Before A Crisis: Proper Planning

- Utility Emergency Communications Plan: Part of overall utility emergency management plan
  - Breaks down significant water, wastewater emergencies
  - Based on best practices. Uses lessons learned by staff.
  - Assigns staff into appropriate roles. Multiple levels, stages.
  - NIMS use: Make sure key staff familiar with NIMS process
  - Details required crisis communications processes
  - Directs customer communications response, media tactics
  - Specifically addresses contact with critical customers
  - Provides templated materials. Sets approval process.
  - Specifies media access
The Crisis: Raw Water Main Break

- Near Riegelwood (20 miles NE of Wilmington)
- Provides Brunswick County Public Utilities, CFPUA, and Pender County with raw water supply. More than 20 million gallons every day.
- Break cut raw water supply by 12.5 million gallons a day
- Repair location difficult to access because of flooding, trees, poor soils, and high groundwater table
Immediate Emergency Response

• Multiple utilities headed to the scene to provide assistance
• Break scenario mirrored CFPUA’s Spring 2016 Full Scale Exercise
• Activated CFPUA Emergency Response Plan, other plans/policies:
  • Utility Emergency Management Plan (includes Communications)
  • Critical Customer List
  • Essential Employee Policy
  • Public Information Policy
  • EOC Activation Policy
  • Mutual Aid and Assistance policies
Communicating During a Crisis

- **CFPUA Emergency Ops Center** up within one hour of notification
- **Emergency Op Center Goals:**
  - Promote open, internal and external agency communications
  - Maintain common operating picture through maps, models, briefings
  - Remain cognizant of external impacts to event (weather, river flood levels)
  - Coordinate, execute consistent, clear communications w/customers using all available tools, outlets:
    - Mass media releases/interviews/pitch work
    - Social media posts, especially for rumor control
    - Emergency notification systems, including DHS Alert
    - Outbound calls to critical customers
Communicating During a Crisis

• First 72 Hours:
  • Initial evaluation placed one jurisdiction into an immediate emergency with mandatory water restrictions
  • Remaining jurisdictions decided to move into voluntary restrictions
  • Critical customers contacted
  • Operated in coordination with each other but conducted separate communications efforts
  • Caused confusion among the media and the public
  • Errors and omissions were constant with one station. Required care/feeding.
  • No impact on water use. REVIEW: Voluntary just doesn’t work.
Communicating During a Crisis

- After first 72 hours:
  - Initial repair attempt failed. Moved to long-term approach.
  - Instituted Unified PIO structure. (I was named the Unified PIO.)
  - Conducted one-on-one interviews on behalf of all parties. “Walked the dog”.
  - Enlisted newspaper to write lead editorial on water restrictions
  - Visited site daily to shoot photos/video to media. No need for press to visit repair scene. Launched new YouTube Channel for reporters, online providers.
  - Used NHC’s DHS Emergency Alert System, countywide billboards
  - Worked with social media influencers online. Facebook, Twitter, Next Door.
  - Social media rumors quickly addressed
Communicating During a Crisis

• Messages for everyone, repeated everywhere:
  • Working with partners for difficult, responsible repair effort
  • Incident response keeping people in water
  • Multi-day event. Need multi-day assistance from customers.
  • Mandatory restrictions vital to maintain supply for essential services
  • Taking every step to stay in water. ASR. Emergency wells. Water tower work.
  • Customers need to cut overall usage by one-third
  • Enforcement actions for outdoor use
  • Best case: Construction of bypass would take several days
  • Safety is a major priority. Steps taken to protect workers.
Water main break in Columbus County prompts mandatory restrictions for customers of CFPUA, Brunswick Public Utilities

CFPUA pleads with customers to conserve water

Utilities race to complete waterline bypass

In Wilmington area, water conservation 'critical'

Mandatory water restrictions to continue throughout the week for Cape Fear Public Utility Authority and Brunswick County Public Utilities customers

CFPUA lifts water restrictions after completion of bypass line

Area responds well to water emergency
GenX, EC Discoveries

Toxin taints CFPUA drinking water

NEW TEFLOWN TOXIN FOUND IN NORTH CAROLINA DRINKING WATER

Sharon Lerner
June 17, 2017, 8:36 a.m.