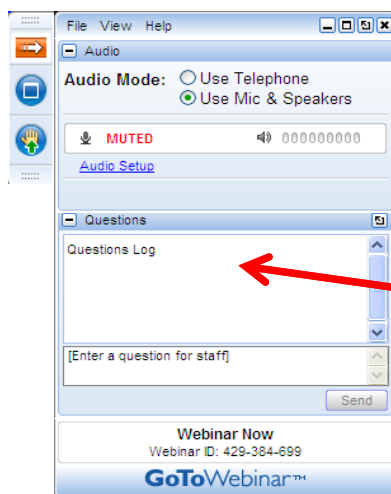# Crisis Communications in The Instant Information Age

Mike McGill, President

1

How to Participate Today

- **Audio Modes**
    - Listen using Mic & Speakers
    - Or, select "Use Telephone" and dial the conference (please remember long distance phone charges apply).
- **Submit your questions using the Questions pane.**
- **A recording will be available for replay shortly after this webcast.**

2

Become & <u>STAY</u> THE GO-TO source for information about your services

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We Live in The Instant Information Age

- Your customers receive the news they want WITHOUT needing to ask for it

- They expect timely information, especially about paid services

- Water/wastewater utilities must meet these higher expectations. Especially during crises.

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Old Days, Old Ways are OVER

- Old mindset: Arrogance. "Customers don't know what I know." "I'll tell them what I want when I want."
- Scar tissue: "Why should I stick my neck out? The press only cares about a bad bill or a bad break."
- "Out of sight? Out of mind? Fine by me."

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- Scar tissue: "Why should I stick my neck out? The press only cares about a bad bill or a bad break."
- "Out of sight? Out of mind? Fine by me."
- Thanks to social media, those days are OVER
- Stick with OLD mindset? Russian Roulette with reputation.
- Not talking days or weeks of damage. Talking YEARS.

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Preparation: Proactive Communications

- You prepare for crisis situations with regular outreach & information

- Consistent, proactive communication with your customers builds trust. That trust is VITAL during water/wastewater crises.

7

Preparation: Proactive Communications

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- Consistent, proactive communication with your customers builds trust. That trust is VITAL during water/wastewater crises.

- PROOF: J.D. Power Water Utility Customer Surveys

  - Scores were 15 to 30% higher when customers remembered proactive communications.   More COMMS? Better results.

- *Media impact? WQA:* In 2015, 27% of customers said they learned about water utility issues from news media. **2017? 43%.**

8

Before a Crisis: Proper Planning

Treat COMMS like any other operation. Have a crisis COMMS plan.

- Structure for proper internal & public release of information
- Ensures customers, key stakeholders & media get the best information as quickly as possible
- Prevents information gaps
- Reduces chances for confusion & anger
- Protects public safety, especially **critical customers**

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Before a Crisis: Proper Planning

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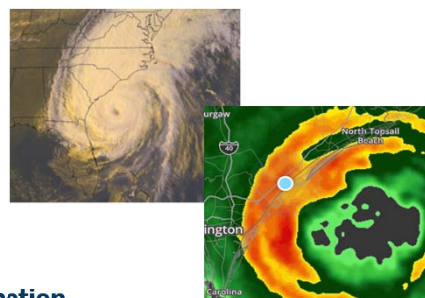- Protects public safety, especially **critical customers**
- Uses pre-written materials. Cuts down on errors.
- Sets approval processes for quality control
- Gives guidelines for media access, social media interaction
- Empowers employees to provide information

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Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Components of a Crisis Communications Plan
(*Part of utility emergency management plan*)

- Breaks down significant water, wastewater emergencies
- Based on best practices. Uses staff knowledge.
- Assigns staff into proper roles. Multiple levels, stages.
- Use of National Incident Management System (NIMS)?
- Details required crisis communications
- Directs customer communications & media response
- Specifically addresses critical customers

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Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Key Areas

- Critical Customers. Critical Customers. Critical Customers.
  - Good definition: Connections critical to public health & safety
    OR rely on services for economic resiliency
  - Public health could be placed at risk due to lack of communication
  - Shouldn't have to wonder what's going on. They will call the media.
  - COMMS failure creates significant distractions. Can harm entire response.
  - Response could be operationally PERFECT but...
  - COMMS failure leaves permanent impression EVERYTHING failed

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Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Key Areas

- Other "quality of life" customers, in addition to everyday customers
  - *Environmentally sensitive areas. Marinas. Water-centric/located businesses.*
- *Key stakeholders*
  - *Board members. Elected officials. Business leaders. Environmental activists.*
  - *Government, first responder communication staffs. Riverkeepers.*

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- *Mass media outlets*
  - *Newspaper editors & beat reporters. TV anchors, reporters & radio hosts.*
- *Social media*
  - *Influencers on Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor, Instagram*

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- *Social media*
  - *Influencers on Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor, Instagram*
- *Employees. Employees. Employees.*
  - *You're a TEAM. Important eyes and ears.*

15

Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Successful structure

- Lays out all possible emergencies
  - *Many covered by utility emergency management plan*
     Coordination with overall emergency plan is ESSENTIAL
  - *Include "active shooter" & "shelter-in-place"*

16

Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Successful structure

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  - *Many covered by utility emergency management plan*
    Coordination with overall emergency plan is ESSENTIAL
  - *Include "active shooter" & "shelter-in-place"*
- Uses current staff with communication skills
  - *Staff who can assist during the news day (5am – 11pm)*
  - *Staff who can assist with social media work (8am – 12am)*
- Use of National Incident Management System (NIMS)
  - If used, COMMS plan follows Incident Command, Unified PIO process
  - If not used, can use communication parts of NIMS

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Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

Successful structure

- Contains guidelines for information gathering
  - Reports from field, employees, key stakeholders & customers
  - Vetting process for rapid but ACCURATE response
- Provides process for messaging & information release

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18

Crafting a Crisis Communications Plan

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- Provides process for messaging & information release
  - What?   *Templates with customization for situation*
  - When?   *Timing for initial response & regular response*
  - Where?   *On scene, at utility offices, in emergency ops centers*
  - How?   *Press releases/interviews, social media content, web content*
  - Who?   *Critical customers. Key stakeholders. General public.*
  - By whom?   *Spokespeople. Top management. CUSTOMER SERVICE.*

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19

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DRILL. DRILL. DRILL. Utility workshops, table tops, full-scale exercises.

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The Crisis: Hewletts Creek SSO

- Major pump station failed during storm. 1 of 29 to lose power.
- 500,000-gallon spill. Just after Consent Decree rollout.
- Largest spill in 7 years. Same pump station.
- Heart of populated area. Major roadway during rush hour.
- Clearly visible, including entry into creek
- All local media on scene. Live TV coverage.
- Early cause: Lightning strike knocked out SCADA, power
- Scrammed station's systems. Caused delayed response.

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Immediate Crisis Response

Activated SSO part of Crisis Communications Plan

- Promotes/manages open utility communications. Internal & external.
- Keeps common operating picture
- Uses event milestones (SSO stoppage, testing process)
- Coordinates, executes consistent & clear communication

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- Promotes/manages open utility communications. Internal & external.
- Keeps common operating picture
- Uses event milestones (SSO stoppage, testing process)
- Coordinates, executes consistent & clear communication
  For Major SSOs:
  - Mass media releases/interviews/Editorial Board call/Op-Ed submission
  - Customer service FAQs/web messages & alerts
  - Key stakeholder phone calls/briefings
  - Social media posts/responses, especially for rumor control

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Immediate Crisis Response

- SSO mirrored utility's workshops, tabletop trainings
- Training = speed. COMMS got to scene before press.
- "Public street," but had safety concerns. Used to manage media.
- Briefed reporters as they arrived. "Minded" them to get video.
- Individual live shots/taped-to-live interviews. (Coin flip.)
- Constant back-and-forth through first 24 hours
- Social media monitored. Responses given with speed & clarity.

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Immediate Crisis Response

Social Media

- Goals: Provide public with information AND blow up misinformation
- 1st Reax: *What happened? How could this happen? You screwed up.*
- SM Posters: Two categories – "Always Angry" & "Looking for Info"
- Quickly implemented COMMS plan. Posted from the scene.
- Reported news/messaging quickly, clearly, & constantly
- Mirrored news update timing. Always mindful of information gaps.
- Employees monitored for negatives, aided rapid response *(Especially Facebook & Nextdoor)*

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Communicating During a Crisis

Messaging Approach: Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats

- Put yourself in your customers' shoes. *"What do they WANT to know?"*
- Not the same as *"What do they NEED to know?"*
- Plan messaging with SWOT in mind:

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26

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  - Strengths: Advantages to emphasize. <u>Base for every response</u>.
    - *Unique situation. Lightning strike. (Gained greater understanding.)*
    - *During major rainfall. State concern low, diluted environmental impact.*
    - *Cleaned site. Test results getting better each day. Safe for public but making sure.*

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  - Weaknesses: Points press/antagonists will use. Address EARLY.
    - *Environmental impact unacceptable*
    - *Backup AND warning systems shouldn't fail*

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  - Opportunities: "Good" details to mix in with bad news
    - *29 pump stations lost power. While significant, only one SSO happened.*
    - *Hard work of employees cut impact. Lost SCADA, sped to sites.*
    - *Sewer system remains strong. Thx to upgrades, 90+% reduction in spill volume*

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  - Threats: Negative messages/messengers/developments
    - *Failure of utility. Incompetence. Big rate increases & we still get major spills.*
    - *Consent Decree rollout designed to fool customers*

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Communicating During a Crisis

Messages for everyone, repeated every opportunity:

- *SSO: Unique, unfortunate. Lightning strike rare, harmed response.*
- *Staff mobilized ASAP, on scene to lessen environmental impact*
- *Multi-day response. SSO ended in hours. Our work continues for days.*
- *No advisories required (heavy dilution). Testing continues to ensure safety.*
- *Test results show significant improvement every day*
- *Outlier. Upgrades – funded by rate increases – cut sewage spilled 90%.*
- *Investigation ongoing. Results publicly released, available online.*
- *Meantime, utility always here to answer questions. ASK US.*

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Communicating During a Crisis

After first 24 hours:

- Waterways always improve post-SSOs. Keep informing the public.
  - *Don't break away early. Post-SSO updates reassure the public.*
  - *Focus on test results showing improving conditions*
- Planned transparency. Information released like clockwork.
- Monitored social media. Rapid response to posts.
- Video, photos to show improvement to media. YouTube Channel.
- Worked w/editorial page editor to shape editorial

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Communicating During a Crisis

Next month, through at least next board meeting:

- Continued to shoot & send out photos, video
- Regular updates on sampling results, waterway status
- Talked about the investigation as a positive
- Produced investigation report for *public* consumption, *not engineers*.
- Op-ed. 500-700 words of your choosing. Automatic placement.
- Informed environmental influencers
- Social media use for information & stop misinformation

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Summary

- **Time to prepare is NOW before a crisis hits. Evaluate, plan & drill.**
- Boost regular communications about your services. Build public trust.
- Treat COMMS like any other operation. Plan benefits ALL stakeholders.
- Crisis hits: Rely on the plan. Quickly get info out. Cover every angle.
- **Remember critical customers. Involve Customer Service, employees.**

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- Boost regular communications about your services. Build public trust.
- Treat COMMS like any other operation. Plan benefits ALL stakeholders.
- Crisis hits: Rely on the plan. Quickly get info out. Cover every angle.
- Remember critical customers. Involve Customer Service, employees.
- SSOs can be unique circumstances. Use SWOT for messaging approach.
- Take advantage of social media. Blow up misinformation, weaken anger.
- Keep communicating. SSOs ALWAYS improve. Reassure the public.
- Proper communication leads to GREATER trust after a crisis

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37