Setting up a Social Media Program

A Guide to Setting Up a Social Media Program for Water Utilities

Disclaimer

The Water Security Division of the Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water has reviewed and approved this guidance document for publication. This document is intended for drinking water utilities who use social media.

This guidance is new. It does not modify or replace any previous EPA guidance documents. This guidance document is intended for use by public water systems to help manage water quality issues via social media. This document does not impose legally binding requirements on any party. The information in this document is intended solely to recommend or suggest and does not imply any requirements. Neither the U.S. Government nor any of its employees, contractors or their employees make any warranty, expressed or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for any third party's use of any information, product or process discussed in this document, or represents that its use by such party would not infringe on privately owned rights. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

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Acknowledgments

# Introduction to Social Media for Water Utilities

Social media has become ubiquitous in our daily life. Many entities utilize social media as a tool to understand customer experience, manage emergencies, and increase security. More specifically, water utilities can employ social media as an additional resource to reach customers, understand customer complaints, and help manage water quality issues. Social media is also useful for communicating with customers in case of an interruption in service.

EPA has developed two guidance documents to assist water utilities in using social media as a Customer Complaint Surveillance (CCS) resource. This document introduces important terminology and concepts related to social media, including basic information about setting up a social media program, how to use different social media platforms, and useful techniques for engaging with customers.

Those familiar with establishing or working in social media programs are encouraged to skip ahead to the subsequent "Using Social Media to Help Manage Water Quality Issues" Guidance Document, which focuses on techniques for utilizing social media as a customer complaint resource.

To skip to the "Using Social Media to Help Manage Water Quality Issues" Guidance Document, click the document icon.

Overview

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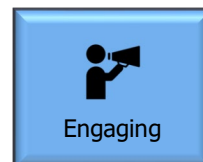
Overview of Social Media Platforms and Terminology

This section contains a brief introduction to common social media platforms, terminology, and examples that are useful for using social media to help manage customer complaints.

Social Media Platforms

- **Twitter**: A micro-blogging social network providing users with a platform for posting short text messages called tweets, which may include web links, pictures, and videos. Twitter is useful for quick updates and messages due to tweets having a short character limit.
- **Facebook**: A social network allowing individuals and organizations to post text, video, pictures, and links to web content. This posted content comprises the profile of an individual or organization, with some sections of the profile being permanent while others fluctuate. Information about the individual can be shared such as location-based information when this feature is enabled. Users can connect directly via private message.
- **Nextdoor**: A neighborhood-based platform, where groups can discuss and post content most relevant to their local community, which is useful for targeted messaging to a specific neighborhood. According to Nextdoor, neighborhoods typically contain 750-1,000 households, however all are unique (Nextdoor, n.d.). Some utilities may qualify for access through Nextdoor's service provider accounts.
- **Other Supplemental Platforms**: There are several other media content sharing and social network platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Instagram that are useful to supplement social media engagement on Twitter, Facebook, and Nextdoor; however, these are not as common for listening for water quality complaints as customers are less likely to post on these platforms on a daily basis about water quality issues.

All of these social media platforms are web- and app-based, making them accessible to anyone with a computer or smartphone. The availability of these platforms is a key reason why social media can be a useful resource for water quality complaints.

Platform	Type	Primary Purpose	Post Character Limit	Strengths
Twitter	Social Network	Post short messages with embedded media	280	Easy two-way communication between utility and customer
Facebook	Social Network	Post long messages with embedded media	63,000	Higher level of detail in posts
Nextdoor	Community-Based Network	Discuss local issues with community	N/A	Geographic and Neighborhood based

Social Media Terminology

General Terminology:

- **Profile**: This is a publicly facing feed of all public posts and activities. As your utility posts more, your profile will act as an archive where the account manager can view previous posts.
- **Newsfeed**: This is a private, running feed that shows recent posts and activity from all the organizations and individuals that your utility follows. A utility can use their newsfeed to gain information about news related to them, as well as engage with the community by liking posts.

Communication Terminology:

- **Handle**: This is similar to a username on other platforms. It appears after the "@" sign. Individuals can tag specific people or organizations by using their handle in a public post.
- **Tag**: This is used to direct a public post to a specific person, page, or group. One can tag a person or organization by including the other person's handle in a post.
- **Direct Message (DM)**: This is a private form of communication that can be used between individuals and organizations.
- **Geotag**: This is used by posters to include and/or identify a location when creating a post. Geolocation capability depends on the user's privacy settings, not the social media platform used; some users allow their posts to be geotagged, while others may not.
- **Hashtag**: This is used on almost all social media platforms as a metadata tag. It can be useful to track posts that use the same hashtag; users are able to search a particular hashtag to see all related content. It appears after the "#" sign and has no spaces.

What is your handle vs. name?
Your handle is unique to you, while your name on social media does not have to be unique to you. For example, there is no limit to the number of Facebook accounts that have "John Smith" as the name. However, there can only be one handle "@JohnSmith" on Facebook.

What is SMS vs. Direct Message?
Short Message Service (SMS) is a text message over a cell tower using a phone. Direct Message is a private message over the internet, typically using a social media platform.

Engagement Terminology:

- **Embedded Media**: Photos, videos, and links can be included in posts. Posts with embedded media are more popular than text posts.
- **Like**: Individuals and organizations are able to like other's posts. This is similar to "up voting" content on other sites. It is useful to increase likes on your posts as popular posts are likely to reach more people.
- **Share**: A customer can share a link to a post or video to invite another user to view the content. It is useful to encourage customers to share your posts with their followers to increase your reach.
- **Follow**: A customer can follow your utility to see your updates directly on their newsfeed. This is similar to subscribing on other sites. For the utility, it is important to increase followers to quickly reach more customers for engagement.
- **Impressions**: This is a metric that some social media management tools use to get a holistic view of your reach by adding up all of your page views, likes, comments, shares, and posts.
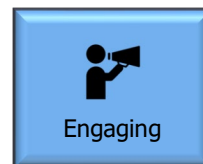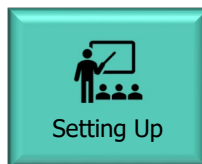
Social Media Examples

These images show examples of social media accounts and posts on Facebook and Twitter. Arrows indicate the locations of features that can be used to engage with community members. It should be noted that social media platforms may have different orientations for where these features are located.

Setting Up a Social Media Program

This section includes details on creating your own social media program including achieving management buy-in, which is important to ensure the long-term success of your program. It also includes best practices for running your social media program.

Achieving Management Buy-In

Creating a social media program can provide value to a utility. Customers are increasingly more likely to report complaints via social media rather than traditional communication methods such as phone call or email. It is faster and more convenient for a customer to send a tweet or post on Facebook rather than calling to report an issue. A social media program for customer complaints and communication can help identify water quality issues quicker and improve response times to customers. If utilities are proactive and communicative on social media before, during, and after a crisis or outage, this can help reduce confusion, misinformation, and harm to the utility's reputation (AWWA, 2019). Conveying this message to leadership can help achieve buy-in.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate has created a Social Media Emergency Management Guidance. This guidance includes templates to help users build a social media business case, develop a social media plan, and build a digital volunteer program, if desired. Water utilities can complete the "Building a Social Media Business Case" template, which is useful to present to management to achieve buy-in. The template helps the user plan resources, time, and money needed to create a social media program.
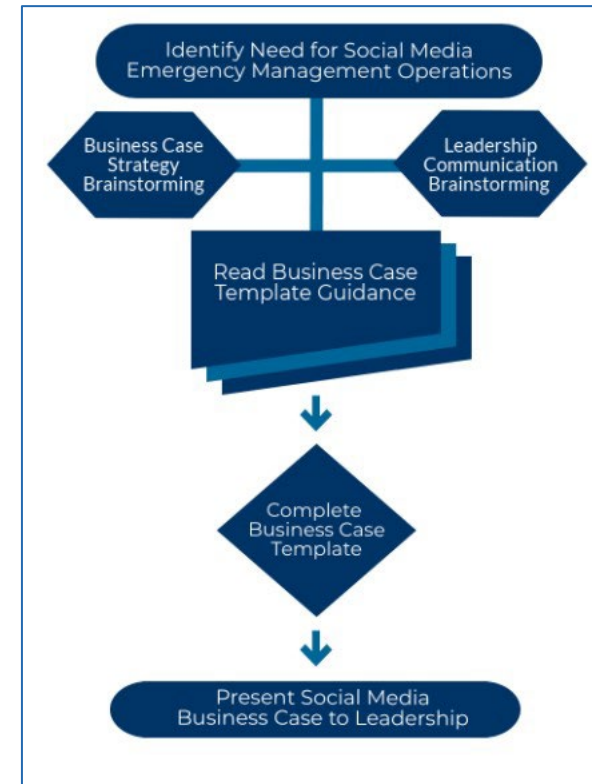
Flow chart for building a business case for social media. Source: Social Media Emergency Management Guidance (DHS' S&T, n.d.)

Assigning Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Depending on the size of your water utility, amount of social media engagement, and budgetary constraints, consider if you can hire a social media manager or if existing staff can share this responsibility. Utilities on average spend 6-80 hours weekly on social media (WRF, 2017). Small utilities typically have less than one staff for social media while larger utilities may share responsibilities between two part-time staff and a social media team lead. Once staff are identified, customize the Roles and Responsibilities form below. More advanced responsibilities for social media management are in the "Using Social Media to Help Manage Water Quality Issues" guidance document.

Team Member Role	Responsibilities	Name and Department	Status
Social Media Team Lead	☐ Overall management ☐ Key Performance Indicator (KPI) development, tracking, and reporting to management (e.g., number of likes, follows…etc.). ☐ Creating a policy and guidelines for social media ☐ Regularly checking accounts to ensure consistent messaging		☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time
Digital Content Lead	☐ Develop content and design for posts ☐ Send content and design to Account Manager for posting		☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time
Social Media/Account Manager	☐ Create and manage social media accounts ☐ Post all content from Digital Content Lead ☐ Respond to all incoming posts *or* ☐ Direct the Customer Service Representative (CSR) to respond to complaints ☐ If utility hashtags are used, search hashtags at least once a day ☐ If using keyword searches, check keywords at least once a week (see "Using Social Media to Help Manage Water Quality Issues" for more details)		☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time
Customer Service Representative (CSR)	☐ Respond to customer's complaints when directed by Account Manager ☐ Collect detailed information from customers regarding water quality complaints during normal business hours ☐ Advise customers about water quality incidents related to typical distribution system issues (e.g., rusty water due to flushing, chlorine odor due to operations) ☐ Provide details on specific water quality complaints to the CSR Supervisor		☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time
Community Manager	☐ Monitor social media interactions and engage in conversations with customers across social media accounts ☐ Focus on building brand visibility on social media accounts by creating a relationship between the audience and the brand via social media. ☐ Manage and engage with brand stakeholders and advocates		☐ Full-Time ☐ Part-Time

Account Management Best Practices

Here are some best practices when managing the social media accounts:

- **Use relevant platforms:** Utilize popular, relevant, and searchable social media platforms. Members of an EPA utility forum comprised of social media experts at drinking water utilities use social media platforms to reach a large audience such as Twitter, Facebook, and Nextdoor. Please note social media platforms and user preferences are constantly changing; therefore, for a successful social media program it is important to adapt to platforms that the user base is utilizing. For each platform, follow directions on their website to create a new business or service provider account.

- **Try to Be consistent:** Ensure that all platforms have the same name and the same general email linked to the account (e.g. [Utility Name] and CustomerService@[UtilityName].org). It is not recommended that the social media account be linked to an individual's email address due to staff turnover and scheduling.

- **Coordinate securely:** Be sure to create secure passwords and document the account email and password for each platform. This information can be shared in a secure manner with members of the social media team. Additionally, some third-party tools provide single sign-on (SSO) enabling secure authentication across multiple platforms with one set of credentials.

- **Manage expectations:** If social media will not be managed 24/7 indicate this on the profile and include the water utility's phone number for afterhours communication or direct customers to the utility's preferred method for reporting water quality concerns.

- **Post regularly to expand reach:** Posts can be informational, fun, or a mixture of both. If the utility posts about outreach events, interested community members can share and like the posts, thereby increasing public reach and creating community engagement. See the EPA's Twitter post on Resilient Strategies for Water Utilities. Posting regular updates like this helps to engage and inform customers. Please note posting frequency varies according to the level of engagement for each platform.

- **Use hashtags to group posts:** When creating dialogue with community members, use hashtags to group posts of similar topics. For example, if a utility has an awareness campaign or event, using hashtags allows all the posts to be searchable and linked together. Common hashtags can be used for promotional events like #EarthDay, #ReduceReuseRecycle, #WaterWeek, or #SaveWater. Additionally, if you have an ongoing construction project or emergency, hashtags like #WaterOutage could be used.

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Work for a drinking water or wastewater utility? You can use EPA's Resilient Strategies Guide to:

💧 Consider climate risks
💧 Identify planning priorities
💧 Find funding resources

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Resilient Strategies Guide for Water Utilities | US EPA
Resilient Strategies Guide, from EPA's Creating Resilient Water Utilities (CRWU), provides information on strategies that address the long-term security at water...

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Engaging on Social Media

This section covers information about engaging with customers, leveraging partners, and communicating during a crisis.

Sharing Your Social Media Information

Utilities can increase customer engagement by using social media to reach more customers and thereby improve customer service. Sharing social media contact information refers to advertising to customers that the utility is present on social media and inviting customers to engage there. As Section 3.1 of EPA's Designing CCS Document details, there are many existing resources to share social media contact information with customers including consumer confidence reports, direct emails, bill inserts, radio, television, billboards, internet, and other social media sites (EPA, 2017).

Campaigns are a useful way to indicate that customers can use social media to report water quality issues. Utilities may choose to educate customers about reporting water quality concerns using social media by encouraging customers to follow the utility social media account and tag the utility in posts to alert the utility of concerns.

Additionally, it is useful to create partnerships with other existing social media accounts in your community to increase engagement and customer reach. For example, directly engaging with 311, emergency management, news media, elected officials, and nearby utilities' social media accounts can help connect your customers to you faster. Some community members may not know who to report water quality issues to; therefore, leveraging existing connections on social media can reduce confusion and improve response times. This can be done by tagging other relevant social media accounts in your posts and asking that they do the same.

Helpful Hashtags

Multiple San Francisco Bay Area water utilities worked collectively to prepare and respond to a power safety power shutoff (PSPS) on social media.

In 2019, the power utility PG&E announced a PSPS which impacted counties in the Sierra Foothills and North Bay. This caused pressure losses, boil water advisories, reduction of water treatment, sewage back up, and discharge of untreated sewage. To communicate the risks to the water supply during the PSPS, water utilities in the Bay Area used social media to alert customers.

On Twitter, local utilities used the hashtag "#PSPS" to consolidate their posts and communicate information about water supply, area closures, and emergency response efforts. As a result, customers could search the hashtag to receive the most up-to-date information. This collaboration helped utilities reach a large audience and increase preparedness across the Bay Area.

Communicating in a Crisis on Social Media

In addition to locating water quality complaints, social media can be beneficial for communication during a crisis. DHS' S&T Social Media Emergency Management Guidance has useful tools for utilizing social media for crisis communication.

Keep in mind these best practices for social media crisis communication:

- **Be proactive:** Establish a social media presence before a crisis, so customers know to look to your account for updates. Additionally, establish a consistent brand voice before a crisis so customers are familiar with messaging formatting and styles. Being the expert and main source of information about water outages can reduce fear and misinformation during a crisis (AWWA, 2019).
- **Scale based on the incident:** Increase social media management capabilities and staff during a crisis to prepare for a higher volume of incoming posts (e.g., leverage the city's 311 center or train digital volunteers).
- **Be predictable and trustworthy:** Post status updates regularly on social media during crises. Being forthcoming with information during a crisis can reduce the number of incoming complaints.
- **Balance damage control with awareness:** If possible, acknowledge and respond to all relevant posts during crises. Additionally, publicly respond to negative comments and ensure the tone of the response is not negative or defensive. Correct misinformation and take conversations off-line as needed.

Here are some helpful crisis communication resources:

- EPA's Water Utility Communication During Emergency Response
- EPA's Guidance for Responding to Drinking Water Contamination Incidents
- Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) IS-42.A Training
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Drinking Water Advisory Communication Toolbox
- FEMA's National Incident Management System

Winter Weather

Austin Water's social media personnel listened and responded to the impacts of an extreme weather event using social media and tools.

In 2021, Winter Storm Uri affected parts of Texas, including the Austin metropolitan area serviced by Austin Water. As a result of the storm, Austin Water faced significant service impacts, including a boil water notice due to pressure loss. Throughout the event, Austin Water used social media (Twitter and Facebook) to keep customers informed of ongoing changes. Austin Water's Operation Center monitored and managed social media posts using Hootsuite, a social media management platform.

Austin Water followed the process of the Incident Command System (ICS) as part of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) laid out by FEMA. The ICS is a guidance for public agencies to manage emergencies and includes roles and responsibilities for handling public information.

Resources

This contains all the relevant resources.

American Water Works Association (AWWA). (2019). *Trending in an Instant: A Risk Communication Guide for Utilities.*

CDC. (2021). *Drinking Water Advisory Communication Toolbox.*
https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/emergency/dwa-comm-toolbox/index.html

DHS S&T. (n.d.). *Social Media Emergency Management Guidance Tool.*
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/social_media_emergency_management_guidance_tool_fact_sheet_092319.pdf

DHS. *(2008). National Incident Management System.*
https://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nims/NIMS_core.pdf

EPA. (2017). *Designing Customer Complaint Surveillance.*
https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-02/documents/customer_complaint_surveillance_design_guidance.pdf

EPA. (2018). *Guidance for Responding to Drinking Water Contamination Incidents.*
https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-12/documents/responding_to_dw_contamination_incidents.pdf

EPA. (n.d.). *Water Utility Communication During Emergency Response.*
https://www.epa.gov/waterutilityresponse/water-utility-communication-during-emergency-response

FEMA. (2021). *IS-42.A:Social Media in Emergency Management.*
https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=is-42.a

Water Research Foundation (WRF). (2017). *Social Media for Water Utilities.* Project #4638.