



**WESTERN MUNICIPAL
WATER DISTRICT**
Strategic Communications Plan

April 2019



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been said that you cannot not communicate.

In other words, even if you communicate poorly to your audiences – or worse, don't communicate at all – you're still sending a message. Unfortunately, it likely isn't the message that showcases your organization in the best light.

That is why a strategic communications plan is so important.

An effective communications plan also helps increase open, two-way communication both internally and externally; enables strong and consistent messages that reinforce and reflect the goals of the organization; provides complete, accurate, and timely information to audiences; and promotes the positive reputation of the agency.

The need for a successful communications plan is underscored even more for public agencies, which have a fiduciary responsibility to the public at-large. Just as a corporation has a responsibility to keep its shareholders informed, so too does a public agency to keep its stakeholders informed.

It should be noted that execution of the communications plan is not the sole responsibility of a few people in the organization. All board members and the entire staff of the organization are ambassadors, and they help define, shape and communicate the organization's mission, vision and strategic priorities. It must be top of mind with every interaction – from one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, to interactions with the media, to emails and beyond.

Western Municipal Water District's (WMWD) new communications plan sets forth the organization's guiding principles for communication; outlines the messaging that will be used in all efforts; details the tools and tactics that will be used to deploy the plan; and identifies the metrics that will be used to measure its effectiveness.

In closing, the plan is considered a living document. As communication tools evolve, metrics shift, and new tools continue to emerge, it is imperative to re-evaluate the plan at regular intervals and update it as needed.





GUIDING PRINCIPLES

All of Western Municipal Water District's communication efforts shall be guided by the principles outlined below in order to set a positive tone and tenor.

Principle 1: Be transparent.

As a public agency, Western operates in an open and transparent manner. These principles should carry over in communication efforts as well by openly communicating about programs, projects and services offered by the District. This principle also applies to controversial issues that may arise.

Principle 2: Be proactive.

No one is going to tell Western's story better than Western itself. That's why this plan encourages the District to tell its story first instead of remaining passive and letting others tell it for them. Pivoting to a proactive position, rather than reacting to issues as they spontaneously arise, will elevate the organization's reputation in the public vernacular and improve overall communication efforts.

Principle 3: Be on message.

WMWD is a unique agency, and its work is complex, which makes explaining it to the public often challenging. A set of succinct key messages and a master narrative have been carefully crafted to aid in explaining the agency's mission and should be used in all communication efforts, both internally and externally.

Principle 4: Be engaging.

Communication has moved away from one-way efforts that simply inform. Instead, audiences expect to weigh in with their opinions and thoughts on various issues. To address this new reality, communication efforts should be established that encourage audience engagement and work to create a sense of collaboration when it makes sense.

Principle 5: Be responsive.

In today's world, communication moves extremely fast. With the newfound ability to get news 24/7 from the palm of our hand, people expect to hear swiftly from an agency when an issue arises. They also expect to get content direct from the source on a regular basis. This plan aims to do both.



TARGET AUDIENCES



Several audiences have been identified as part of WMWD's communications plan. They are outlined below and organized by internal/external segments.

INTERNAL

Board Members

Employees

Professional Consultants

Construction Contractors (working on behalf of the District)

EXTERNAL

PRIMARY

Retail Customers

Wholesale Customers

Larger User Groups

- Altman
- John Gless
- March Air Force Base
- Riverside National Cemetery
- Riverside Unified School District
- Victoria Grove Maintenance Association
- Village Nursery

Key Elected Officials

- Federal
- State
- County of Riverside
- City Council/Mayors
- Retail Agency Boards
- Key City Staff

Community Groups

- Woodcrest MAC
- Residents Association of Greater Lake Mathews (RAGLM)

Educational Groups

- Students/Parents
- Teachers/Schools



SECONDARY

Civic and Business Groups, Industry Associations

- Building Industry Association (BIA)
- Local Chambers of Commerces

Developers, Architects, Builders

TERTIARY

Government Agencies in the Inland Empire

Residents At-Large in the Inland Empire



MASTER NARRATIVE AND KEY MESSAGES



A thoughtful master narrative and key message platform provides recommended language to ensure all communication done on behalf of Western is clear, concise, and easily understandable. This is extremely important given the complex nature of Western's work.

By aiming towards making these messages quick to recall and easily broadcast by Western leadership and staff, the organization's mission will be better communicated and reinforced in a memorable manner.

Master Narrative

Western Municipal Water District is one of the largest public agencies in Riverside County providing water and sewer services to nearly a million people across one of California's most populous regions.

Providing customers with an exceptional user experience is our top priority, and we do that by pairing consistent delivery of safe, reliable drinking water with outstanding customer service.

We see ourselves as more of a business than a bureaucracy, which is why we work tirelessly to ensure operations are as cost-efficient as possible; our imported water supply is diversified, including securing local water sources; and our region's needs are being represented at the state and federal levels.

We view our customers as essential partners in ensuring long-term water security for our region. Through transparency and open governance, we work hand-and-hand on important issues like water conservation and local water procurement.

Simply put, Western is focused on being the definitive leader in water and sewer services, upholding the highest level of stakeholder trust, and delivering a best-in-class customer experience through its water product and customer service.



Key Messages

Key Message 1:

SUPERIOR SERVICE

The Western team provides a best-in-class customer service experience for all District customers.

- 1.1 Western provides high-quality, valuable services to customers through things like landscape and irrigation advice; bill payment assistance; online how-to videos and more.
- 1.2 Western maintains a highly trained professional workforce necessary to manage and operate a complex water and sewer system.
- 1.3 Meter technicians are dispatched to a customer's home within a few hours upon request.
- 1.4 Western strives to provide solutions to customer issues within one phone call.
- 1.5 Western participates in industry associations to keep informed on the latest trends in customer service, legislative actions, best practices, energy-saving opportunities, and operational efficiencies.

Key Message 2:

WATER QUALITY

Western delivers its customers the highest quality water available.

- 2.1 When Western customers turn on their tap, they can count on their water being purified, tested and monitored to protect their health and safety.
- 2.2 Western's water comes primarily from the pristine snow melt of Northern California, which is the purest water available.
- 2.3 Western's operations team take daily water samples from throughout the District to ensure its water measures up to local, state, and federal purity standards.
- 2.4 A national beverage company located one of their largest production plants in our service area specifically because of Western's superior water quality.
- 2.5 Western is able to use and leverage the nationally recognized leader in water quality, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, to deliver the gold standard in quality in the water industry.



Key Message 3:

WATER RELIABILITY

Western has a 100 percent reliability rate that ensures water and sewer service for its customers.

- 3.1 Western is diversifying its water supply so that it isn't solely reliant on imported water, which is costlier and can be prone to service interruptions.
- 3.2 The Chino and Arlington Desalters are two great examples of projects that are transforming local groundwater into potable drinking water for customers.
- 3.3 Western recently invested \$36 million in the La Sierra Pipeline, a five-mile pipe that will deliver new groundwater to customers.
- 3.4 The Victoria Recharge Basin project is also under construction and will capture stormwater from precipitation and runoff that would otherwise be lost and use it to replenish the groundwater supply.
- 3.5 Western has a strong maintenance and replacement program that continually protects the integrity of its pipes, pumps, and treatment systems to ensure water delivery is not interrupted due to equipment failure.
- 3.6 Local water supply projects will help keep costs down, since Western has control over this local water versus imported water that it must purchase from a third party.
- 3.7 Western recently entered into a historic and innovative agreement with Riverside Public Utilities to purchase their surplus groundwater, thus reducing the need for costlier imported water and ultimately helping provide a more economical water rate.

Key Message 4:

VALUE

A typical customer uses more than 650 gallons of water every day—delivered right to their home in the middle of an arid region—for about the cost of a single gallon of milk.

- 4.1 The minimal cost per day allows customers to shower, wash their clothes, water their yard, brush their teeth, prepare meals for their family, and so much more.
- 4.2 Western's cost for delivering this service is far less than a customer trying to invest in their own personal infrastructure to handle the same water delivery and sewer service.



- 4.3 Western proactively works to protect ratepayers from costly regulations affecting water movement in northern California, including taxes that would subsidize water use in other parts of the state.

Key Message 5:

CUSTOMER CONTROL

Western empowers customers with supportive programs and useful information so each customer can take control of their water use and lower their monthly bill.

- 5.1 Free efficiency evaluations provide customers with complimentary irrigation evaluations and recommendations to increase irrigation efficiency.
- 5.2 A comprehensive landscape program managed by Western helps customers learn about and implement waterwise landscaping, which can help reduce water needs. Waterwise plant lists, free landscape design plans, workshops and a new waterwise gardening handbook are just some of the offerings for this program.
- 5.3 A new meter replacement program, called Advanced Metering Infrastructure, is replacing aging meters for free in order to improve accuracy in reading and reporting water usage. This helps customers understand their household needs and pinpoint opportunities to conserve water.
- 5.4 Western is actively developing these programs and informational tools so that each customer can take control of their own water use and cost.

Key Message 6:

FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Western prides itself in using customer revenue responsibly to build, monitor and maintain the systems that deliver water and sewer service today and for future generations.

- 6.1 Western is committed to stabilizing the District’s financial position through cost-effective service, economical rates and prudent investment strategies.
- 6.2 Every dollar received from water or sewer rates, property taxes, investment returns, and federal and state grants is carefully accounted for using government-approved accounting procedures and audited by internal and independent accountants.



- 6.3 Every expenditure is authorized through a transparent public board process with employees routinely justifying every expenditure to ensure Western conducts business in the most cost-effective manner.
- 6.4 Because of Western’s responsible fiscal stewardship, it is able to maintain its existing infrastructure and invest prudently to ensure it has the funds necessary to replace aging pipelines and equipment and invest in innovative water projects.
- 6.5 Western takes a conservative approach to investing in order to maintain financial stability during downturns in the economy. It also routinely plans for responsible economic growth in its service area.
- 6.6 Western responsibly collects appropriate revenue through rates to operate the water and sewer systems and provide the lifestyle that its customers enjoy.

Key Message 7:

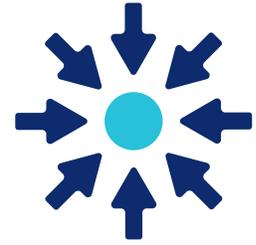
LEADERSHIP

Western is a regional leader and collaborator in all facets of water and sewer services.

- 7.1 Western implements technologies and operational practices that increase efficiencies and lower costs.
- 7.2 Western hires the most qualified personnel with the highest state certifications and advanced degrees in their respective fields.
- 7.3 Western leadership tracks and challenges regulatory and legislative efforts that unnecessarily add to the cost of providing service.



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES



The goal of this communications plan is as follows:

To ensure that key stakeholders know who Western is, what they do, why they are important, and understand the positive impact and value they have on the region as a whole.

Objectives

The following objectives have been identified to support the goal of this plan:

1. Elevate the reputation and customer/stakeholder awareness of the value of Western's services both internally and externally across all audiences.
2. Improve the content, timing and delivery mechanisms for stakeholder outreach and enhance the regional understanding of Western's mission, vision and strategic priorities.
3. Build up and strengthen Western's brand identity both internally and externally.
4. Increase positive coverage for Western's digital footprint (media, social, etc.).

Tactical Recommendations

A variety of tactics should be deployed in order to reach the stated goal and objectives listed in this plan. The tactics fall into nine categories: benchmarking, content creation, branding, collateral development, earned media, owned media, paid media, community outreach and other. Each category is explained below with a summary of recommended actions to support each area. Keep in mind that many categories work together and are dependent on one another, and therefore should be handled in the sequence noted below.

- 1. Benchmarking:** It is important to gauge perceptions of Western before, during and after deployment of the communications plan. This will provide important benchmarking data to determine whether our efforts are having the intended impacts desired. The following tactics are recommended to accomplish this:
 - 1.1 Conduct annual survey about perceptions, communications and community engagement efforts looking at both qualitative and quantitative data.
 - 1.2 Conduct a communications audit to memorialize key metrics at start of plan deployment (i.e. Facebook engagement rate, Twitter followers, shares, open rate, click through rate, etc).
 - 1.3 Evaluate survey results with senior staff and adjust communication efforts as needed.



2. Content Creation: Developing engaging content is one of the most important elements of a successful communications plan. A master narrative and key message platform has been developed as part of this plan and should be used in every communication interaction Western makes – whether meeting one-on-one with elected officials, speaking to community groups, engaging the media, or producing collateral. By adhering to these pre-determined themes, Western’s messaging will be more succinct and cohesive. The following tactics are recommended to accomplish this:

- 2.1 Distribute and explain master narrative and key message platform to board members and all staff. Explain that this language should be referenced and used as frequently as possible in all communication efforts (emails, staff reports, media interviews, etc.).
- 2.2 As an extension of the messaging, use “plain speak” in all outbound communication tools in order to clearly articulate what Western does and its impact in the community.
- 2.3 Create backgrounders on important elements of Western’s business operations (i.e. local water supply projects, sewer treatment, etc.).
- 2.4 Create yearly editorial calendar to be used to plan, develop and deploy content at key points throughout the year.

3. Branding: Essential to any communications plan is a consistent visual brand identity. By establishing visual communication standards (i.e. logo use, typography, color palette, design elements, photo styling), Western will begin working towards immediate visual recognition of the agency. The following tactics are recommended to accomplish this:

- 3.1 Create new brand (visual identity, tagline) for Western to signal monumental change in organization.
- 3.2 Once mark is agreed upon, develop a comprehensive style guide that calls out visual communication standards including logo usage, typography, color palette, collateral designs, photo styling.
- 3.3 Communicate these standards to the Western board and employees so they have an understanding of the purpose, expectations and procedures.
- 3.4 Deploy new branding for organization.



- 4. Collateral Development:** Collateral is any communication tool used to help amplify Western’s message. Examples include, but are not limited to, fact sheets, brochures, eNewsletters, website, videos, photos, PowerPoint presentations, folders, business cards, stationery, etc. All collateral material should be on brand and on message. It is important that work in this area is done after tactics 1, 2 and 3 are completed. The following tactics are recommended to accomplish this:
- 4.1 **Explainer Piece.** Create a four-page general explainer piece on Western to be used at community and civic presentations, meetings with new business partners, meetings with elected officials, briefings with media, or anytime Western needs to be understood by an interested party. Have the piece professionally designed and printed and place in key position on website. Include in branded presentation folder (see below) as a leave behind for all meetings with key stakeholders. Include copies in the lobby of WMWD.
 - 4.2 **Fact Sheets:** Inventory existing fact sheets and determine any additional needs. Rewrite and redesign all pieces to be in alignment with new messaging and branding. Print pieces professionally and place in key positions on website. Include in branded presentation folder as a leave behind for all meetings with key stakeholders. Include copies in the lobby of WMWD.
 - 4.3 **Annual Report:** Produce a four- to eight-page annual report at the end of each year that highlights key projects, programs and services. Distribute via eNewsletter, place on website, and hand-deliver copies to key stakeholders. (See Tactic 9.1 for tie in with this tactic). Include copies in the lobby of WMWD.
 - 4.4 **Folder:** Produce on-brand pocket folder for board members and senior staff to use when presenting materials to key stakeholders and business partners. Folder could also be used during media briefings to provide background information.
 - 4.5 **Website:** Audit site and develop recommendations on structure and content improvements. Implement recommendations as approved by WMWD to bring the site in alignment with brand and messaging. Exploration could result in recommendation to develop a new website.
 - 4.6 **Digital Assets:** Create on brand digital assets to be used on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Nextdoor and LinkedIn in order to better represent that agency. Create on brand Mailchimp templates for news releases, news digest, and general eNewsletter.
 - 4.7 **Video:** Produce a two-minute explainer video for WMWD that underscores the human-interest angle and impact Western makes throughout Riverside County. Consider topic-specific video content if budget allows (water conservation, infrastructure projects, etc.) for additional videos.



- 4.8 PowerPoint: Produce on brand and on message PowerPoint to be used for all WMWD presentations. Consider topic-specific presentations if budget allows.
- 4.9 Photo Library: Establish a curated photo library of key WMWD projects, programs and services that can be used in all collateral material.
- 4.10 Display Materials: Produce tablecloth and banners that are on brand and on message to use at community festivals and events (see Tactic 8.4)

5. Earned Media: Earned media is any article/story that appears in a newspaper, on a television channel, on radio, in a blog, or other media as a direct result of your proactive PR efforts. The medium must not be controlled by you in order to fall into this category. The effort is important because it lends further credibility to your cause. The following tactics are recommended in this area:

- 5.1 Weekly strategy discussion with general manager's office to forecast story ideas and brainstorm angles.
- 5.2 Issue proactive news release at least two times per month (+/-) in plain speak with human interest angle, when possible. Respond to media inquiries within 24 hours. Coordinate interviews with WMWD as interest arises.
- 5.3 Customize pitches when appropriate to target industries (community reporters, hyperlocal publications).
- 5.4 Place all news releases on the homepage of website (top three most recent should always appear) and keep an archive of all past releases one click away in order to create a digital footprint of news.
- 5.5 Conduct informal desk-side meetings with key reporters to confirm understanding of WMWD, its role, and its limitations. These meetings should be scheduled when any new reporters are added to Western's beat.
- 5.6 Conduct media training for board members and any senior-level staff who will be interacting with the press on a regular basis.
- 5.7 Conduct quarterly hard-hat tours with key media to tour relevant Western-related projects (La Sierra Pipeline, Sterling Pump Station, Victoria Recharge Basin, etc.).
- 5.8 Track media coverage on weekly basis to understand trends and gaps in coverage.
- 5.9 Maintain a current media list; scrub list regularly to ensure accuracy.



- 6. Owned Media:** Owned media is communication tools that you have control over – things like your website, social media platforms, blogs, etc. Tactics recommended in this area include:
- 6.1 Website: Continually post fresh content on WMWD website in order to keep things current and relevant.
 - 6.2 Social Media: Create a monthly social media platform with relevant content per editorial calendar. Curate visual digital assets that are on brand to post alongside copy. Consider involvement on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Nextdoor and LinkedIn. Use social media platforms to post about organization news, industry trends, congratulations to other local entities that have relationships with Western.
 - 6.3 Explore various methods of streaming board meetings.
- 7. Paid Media:** While often more expensive than other efforts, paid media can help amplify your message on platforms that you may not be able to reach with your traditional efforts. Because of this, paid media is an important component to a well-rounded communications plan. Tactics for this area include:
- 7.1 Identify various platforms and publications available that reach Western’s target audience. Research costs associated with paid advertising and plan an advertising calendar based on available budget.
 - 7.2 Develop a campaign theme for the year to be used across platforms (i.e. PBS, TV news, movie theatres, malls, local restaurants, etc.) Develop sub-campaigns for more hyper-targeted ad buys if appropriate.
- 8. Community Outreach:** Thoughtful community relations are part of any good, comprehensive communications plan for a public agency. The work done in this area is a fundamental ingredient for the health of the organization to nurture positive, cooperative relationships between themselves and the public. The tactics under this area include:
- 8.1 Community group presentations. Curate a comprehensive list of community organizations that would benefit from an understanding of Western and make an effort to book the GM, or appropriate senior staff, at upcoming meetings to present a Western 101 presentation or relevant topic that aligns with Western’s message platform. Presenters should bring the four-page explainer piece and/or appropriate fact sheets to leave behind for interested parties.
 - 8.2 Hold community coffees or “lunch and learns” each quarter in key neighborhoods; build calendar out one year in advance and coordinate it with the content calendar (see Tactic 2.4).
 - 8.3 Develop and promote a speakers’ bureau utilizing subject matter experts within WMWD. Actively seek out speaking opportunities for them in order to carry the message of Western to key audiences.



- 8.4 Research and participate in community events and festivals in key communities. Book space to have a table with collaterals, display boards of current projects, etc. Consider engaging in unique and fun ways beyond a simple information table (i.e. host a blind water taste test akin to the Pepsi challenge).
- 8.5 Conduct quarterly Western 101 tours for interested community members. Tours will include a morning or afternoon guided drive of Western's projects with a coordinated narrative that supports WMWD's key messages.

9. Other

- 9.1 Report to the Community: Host a luncheon congruent to the release of your annual report to outline accomplishments from the year. Seek sponsorships from key partners to underwrite the cost of the event. Unveil annual report content in presentation form and present each attendee with takeaway copy. Consider producing a companion video to be shared during event and online that summarizes key accomplishments.
- 9.2 Celebratory recognition and awards: Research opportunities and participate both in attendance and in application of awards, when possible.



METRICS



To gauge the success of this plan, metrics will be established to continually monitor efficacy. This will allow Western to optimize components of the plan throughout its implementation.

The goal of this plan, as mentioned earlier, is:

To ensure that key stakeholders know who Western is, what they do, why they are important, and understand the positive impact and value they have on the region as a whole.

The objectives of this plan, as mentioned earlier, are to:

1. Elevate the reputation and customer/stakeholder awareness of the value of Western’s services both internally and externally across all audiences.
2. Improve the content, timing and delivery mechanisms for stakeholder outreach and enhance the regional understanding of Western’s mission, vision and strategic priorities.
3. Build up and strengthen Western’s brand identity both internally and externally.
4. Increase positive coverage for Western’s digital footprint (media, social, etc.).

We recommend two types of measurement to gauge implementation success. The first are *output metrics*, which are considered “counting” metrics. These metrics track the amount of outputs related to the campaign. For instance, activity metrics would track the number of news releases issued per year or the number of community outreach events held. While output metrics are an important data point in evaluating the overall outreach effort, they only tell a portion of the story (i.e. what we’ve done).

Perhaps more important are *outcome metrics*, which more accurately measure whether or not the needle was moved with key goals like “elevating Western’s reputation,” for instance.

Output metrics to benchmark and establish goals should include:

- Number of emails sent to customers and/or other stakeholder groups
- Website traffic data
- Number of news releases produced
- Number of custom media pitches offered
- Number of paid media advertisements placed
- Number of community outreach events held

Outcome metrics to benchmark and establish goals should include:

- Customer and stakeholder satisfaction levels (in comparison to baseline data)
- Email open and click-through rates
- Website quality analytics (time spent on site, return visits)
- Earned media placements through PR efforts
- Social media engagement (reach, likes, comments, follows, impressions)
- Organic search traffic
- Event attendance
- Program participation

Other measurement tools to be considered in evaluating the plan’s effectiveness include surveys (online and/or in person), focus groups, a comprehensive digital footprint analysis and observations.



CONCLUSION

This plan has been developed to assist Western in spreading the word about the programs, projects and services it offers to the people of western Riverside County. It has also been designed to elevate the agency's visibility and image among key stakeholders in the community.

Execution of this plan is considered mission critical to help Western achieve a higher level of success in raising the water knowledge in the communities it serves. Although the investment to implement the Strategic Communications Plan will require significant time and resources, the benefit to Western—more knowledgeable customers and stakeholders—will be worth the effort and yield better results than the current unfocused, untargeted, and less strategic and effective methods of outreach and communication. Communicating a well-crafted message is vital when you consider the far-reaching impact the organization has on all local residents. The damage done to Western's credibility by letting individuals communicate their own inaccurate messages via social media channels cannot continue and gets harder to repair the longer Western fails to respond with clear facts.

By pivoting to a proactive, transparent, strategic message-based stance, Western will help ensure its target audiences receive and understand the information Western intends to communicate.

This plan is considered a living document and should be reviewed regularly and readjusted when needed. As additional communication tools emerge, they could be considered and incorporated where appropriate.

This is an exciting time for Western, and this communications plan will help guide the agency's efforts to amplify the good news they have to share about delivering safe, reliable water and sewer services to nearly one million people across Riverside County.

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