

# Ask the Experts?

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.

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*Drinking water regulations, contaminants, and technologies have changed considerably over the years. While those in the drinking water industry likely have a good grasp on the effect these changes have, system customers and others in the public may not be so knowledgeable. Needless to say, as drinking water issues become more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate necessary information to system customers and the public.*

## *How do you communicate complicated details to people who may not fully understand all of the intricacies of the situation?*

### Do Your Homework First

Having worked with hundreds of U.S. water utilities, it is common to hear about their failed efforts at public outreach and communication on a particular issue. What I also notice with these stories is how rare it is for these same systems to have surveyed or conducted an audience analysis before they launched their pricey information campaign. They failed to do their homework, and later were mystified about why they didn't achieve their desired results!

The public is overloaded with information today. Once utilities have gathered the data they need to begin an information campaign, such as facts and figures from the audience analysis, and to the extent possible, they should express ideas and information visually. Research has shown that people are more likely to grasp and remember information that has a visual appeal, including lots of graphics and color.

Unfortunately, to explain all regulations, contaminants, and technologies, you would end up with a very large book and information overload. However, if a person has a specific question, a simple fact sheet might be a good place to start. For those people who have an aversion to reading, they can always call their purveyor or regulatory agency to explain the facts.

If it's really an intricate (complicated, political, costly, etc.) issue that needs to be explained to customers, it's best to use all your available resources to explain it in a public format that includes a visual display, presentation by a utility representative, expert testimony or regulatory commentary, and relevant handouts to take with them to digest at a later time. It also does not hurt to relate it to your own personal family. More importantly, give everyone an opportunity to ask questions and answer all of them truthfully. And, keep answers short and speak slowly!

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### Include Visuals When Needed

To fully comprehend a situation, some things require detail. If a regulation, contaminant, or technology can be explained succinctly, I'm sure it would be easier for most people to understand. The Washington State Department of Health has gone a long way in doing this by providing fact sheets that cover many drinking water-related topics. *On Tap* provides a similar service, although the target audience is small community purveyors.

Do you have a suggestion? *On Tap* editors are always eager to learn from you. Here's how to contact us:

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