



Executive summary

Introduction

This report forms deliverables D6.3.1 and D6.3.2 and is a report on best practice in communicating risks with consumers. It forms part of the Work Area 6 activities in the TECHNEAU project and combines an overview of the literature on risk communication with an evaluation of a number of water-industry-specific case studies.

Importance

Guide to best practice in risk communication of potential value to water companies, municipalities and decision makers in general.

Approach

Desk-based literature and analysis.

Overview of Findings

To compile this guide we have looked at a range of case studies that can be broadly put into two categories; short term crisis handling scenarios and longer term planning and development scenarios. In the former we look at how people have handled what are usually contamination events. In the latter we look at attempts to introduce new treatment processes, usually re-use or desalination. In both cases citizen's continued good will needs to be maintained or regained so that either information is acted on appropriately or that major decisions are accepted and projects are not derailed.

We have drawn on a range of sources to compile the case studies including existing published reviews, the literature relating to specific cases, media reports and personal communications with water companies.

The main body of the text discusses a range of communication practices and attempts to identify best practice for the two broad scenario categories. The Appendices provide brief overviews of the case studies used to generate the report and are of interest in their own right.

From the case studies we are able to draw some general conclusions and recommendations.

For crisis events:

- Have contingency plans prepared in advance and make sure these are shared with other agencies likely to be involved in incident handling.
- Planned joint incident handling (e.g. with hospitals, national safety bodies, the police etc.) will suggest to the public a high degree of foresight and competence and it is unlikely that all the bodies involved will be simultaneously regarded as untrustworthy by the public.
- Ensure that there are contingency plans to allow sufficient means available for the public to get in contact with you using the methods they are likely to want to use.

- Use the web and SMS technologies to your advantage by ensuring regularly updated information is available during an incident.
- Consider having a single human face of the company or municipality as the primary conduit to the media.
- Empathise with consumers and make it clear that you understand the inconvenience being caused.
- Do not issue information unless you are certain of its accuracy. Explaining that you do not know something but are investigating it is preferable to issuing inaccurate information.
- Consider exploiting social networks and SMS technologies to facilitate quick communications.
- Build good relations with the news media over time so that they are sympathetic to your problems when you need them to help in a crisis.

For longer-term major investment scenarios:

- A number of major infrastructure investment schemes have failed due to public opposition in the last two decades.
- In general, attempts to engage the public actively in the decision making process lowers the likelihood of expensive project implementation failures.
- A number of engagement options are available though a successful campaign is unlikely to rely on just one of these.
- Active public engagement is likely to be more expensive than simple, one-way communication strategies.
- Active public engagement needs to be planned and is likely to slow down the decision making process.
- As a result of the above careful consideration needs to be given to the aims and scope of communication exercises and these need to be weighed against the available resources and other political and time constraints.
- Collaborating openly with other trusted information sources may enhance your credibility.

Finally, to help the industry in the future better understand what contributes to successful and unsuccessful communication campaigns we encourage companies to publish their own in-house evaluation research and reviews.

More information

The report is deliverables 6.3.1 & 6.3.2

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