



2024 Strategic Communications: H2O Workshop

June 4 - 5 | Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront | Virginia Beach, VA

As of May 30, 2024

Monday, June 3

1:00 – 4:00

Optional Facility Tour – Hampton Road Sanitation District SWIFT Research Center

Join interested fellow clean water professionals on an optional pre-workshop tour of the Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD) Sustainable Water Initiative for Tomorrow (SWIFT) research center, where HRSD is employing cutting edge technology to clean and reuse wastewater to further protect the region's environment, enhance the sustainability of the region's long-term groundwater supply and help address environmental pressures such as Chesapeake Bay restoration, sea level rise and saltwater intrusion. You can see a virtual tour [here](#).

Transportation will be provided to and from the Workshop hotel. Participation in this event is limited to the first 25 people who register. Please complete [this form](#) to submit your RSVP by May 24.

5:30 – 6:30

Catch 31,
Lobby Level

Optional Pre-Workshop Happy Hour

Gather with other *Workshop* participants for an optional pre-StratComm Happy Hour at Catch 31, the restaurant at the Workshop hotel! First drink is on NACWA, then everyone is on their own!

Tuesday, June 4

8:30 – 11:30

Peacock Foyer

Registration

9:00 – 12:00

Peacock Salon A/B

Plenary Session I

Opening and Welcoming Remarks

Bess McCoy, *Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee*
Manager of Public Affairs
Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District, St. Louis, MO

Oluwole "OJ" McFoy, *NACWA President*
General Manager
Buffalo Sewer Authority | Buffalo, NY

Jay Bernas, NACWA Board Member
General Manager
Hampton Roads Sanitation District | Virginia Beach, VA

9:15 – 10:15

A Brave New World: Artificial Intelligence Meets Public Relations and External Communications

Professions of all stripes are struggling to understand how the advent and increasing widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) will impact their work, and communications is no different. While AI can make certain tasks remarkably easier to accomplish, it also presents significant challenges and minefields. How can communications professionals, especially those in the clean water sector, use AI in ways that are beneficial but do not create ethical problems? What are the considerations that comms professionals should think about when using AI? This discussion will attempt to address some of these tricky questions.

Jamie Floer, Communications Manager
Toho Water Authority | Kissimmee, FL

Sam Villegas, Principal Consultant
Raftelis | Chantilly, VA

10:15 – 10:45

Networking Break

10:45 – 12:00

Changing Public Attitudes and Perceptions – Key Strategies for Water Sector Communicators

Despite the critical role clean water utilities play in their communities, the public is often unaware of what they do. Or worse, the public may have incorrect assumptions or believe false narratives about the services these utilities provide. Communicators must work to correct these narratives, debunk incorrect myths, and find ways to change public attitudes and perceptions about the services our utilities provide and their function as vital anchor institutions in the community. This panel discussion will address how communications professionals can engage in this important work.

Ben Glickstein, Director of Communications
WaterReuse Association | Alexandria, VA

Michael McNutt, Public Affairs and Communications Manager
Las Virgenes Municipal Water District | Calabasas, CA

Lacie Weaver, Community Outreach & Education Specialist
Hampton Roads Sanitation District | Virginia Beach, VA

Josh Weinstein, President and Creative Director
Creative Co-Op | Exeter, NH

12:15 – 1:45

Peacock Salon C

Luncheon

Keynote Address – Community Engagement: A Strategic Priority for HRSD's 2030 Vision

The Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD) leadership recently updated their Strategic Plan using the scenario planning process. Learn how and why Community Engagement took a front seat to become a key strategic priority essential to the utility's future.

Jay Bernas, NACWA Board Member

1:45 – 4:30
Peacock Foyer

Registration

2:00 – 3:15

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions I

Spotswood Arms

Option 1

How and Where to Pitch Your Media Story

Grabbing the media's and your community's attention to tell your story can be hard, especially in today's environment where there are so many different mediums and competing storylines. This workshop will focus on how to make the best pitch and how to pick the right medium to tell your story.

Vince Morris, Senior Vice President
KGL Communications | Washington, DC

Jeannie Smith, *Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee*
Director of Administration and External Affairs
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District | Cleveland, OH

Peacock Salon A/B

Option 2

Ready, Set, Pivot: How to Handle Crisis Communications

An unexpected crisis can, in a remarkably short period of time, damage your utility's reputation and destroy years of trust with the community. Accordingly, it is critical that clean water utilities and their communicators know how to react in these unexpected moments. This workshop will provide key strategies every communication professional should know along with tabletop exercises to simulate response scenarios.

Bess McCoy, *Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee*

Mack Bradley, President
StandPoint Public Affairs | St. Louis, MO

Albemarle Hall

Option 3

Sharing Experiences to Build Public Awareness of PFAS

A recent survey showed that nearly 50% of Americans have never heard of PFAS. But given the intense regulatory scrutiny water utilities are now under around these chemicals, this lack of awareness makes it difficult for utilities to communicate with their public about what new PFAS regulations mean and how to change public behavior. This workshop will allow utility comms professionals to discuss what tactics and strategies they have employed in communicating about PFAS.

Amanda Wegner, Communications & Public Affairs Director
Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District | Madison, WI

3:15 – 3:45

Networking Break

3:45 – 5:00

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions II

Spotswood Arms

Option 1

How and Where to Pitch Your Story

Grabbing the media and your community's attention to tell your story can be hard, especially in today's environment where there are so many different mediums and competing storylines. This workshop will focus on how to make the best pitch and how to pick the right medium to tell your story.

Vince Morris, KGL Communications

Jeannie Smith, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

Peacock Salon A/B

Option 2

Ready, Set, Pivot: How to Handle Crisis Communications

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Amanda Wegner, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

5:30 – 6:30

Foyer

Networking Reception

Wednesday, June 5

8:30 – 10:30

Peacock Foyer

Registration

9:00 – 9:05

Peacock Salon A/B

Opening Remarks

Jeannie Smith, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

9:05 – 10:15

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions III

Spotswood Arms

Option 1

Beyond the Numbers: How Best to Measure Utility Awareness and Performance

Whether you want to assess public trust, measure customer satisfaction, gain data to drive messaging and strategic decisions, or identify opportunities to strengthen communication with the public, this workshop will explore the power of community surveys and focus groups to assess where your internal and external audiences are at.

Amanda Wegner, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Peacock Salon A/B

Option 2

2 Rate Increases, 1 Ballot: Lessons Learned from Utility Public Outreach

St. Louis MSD Project Clear recently navigated the complex waters of proposing two simultaneous rate increases, one for stormwater and one for wastewater. This workshop and case study will analyze the strategic approach taken by MSD's public affairs team and its outreach plan to prepare votes, providing valuable insights for other utilities into successful public outreach methods and approaches.

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

Mack Bradley, StandPoint Public Affairs

Albemarle Hall

Option 3

Engaging All Community Voices: Ensuring Everyone is Heard

Clean water utilities serve a wide array of customers with different needs, challenges, and priorities. Given this diversity, it is critical that utilities can effectively communicate and engage with all different types of people and communities within its service area – especially those that are disadvantaged or vulnerable. This workshop will explore how utility communications professionals can help with this effort in different contexts, including equity in billing and outreach to neighborhoods that may have been historically ignored by utility outreach.

Bethany Latham, Communications & Outreach Manager
AlexRenew | Alexandria, VA

Amanda Waters, General Counsel & Deputy General Manager
AlexRenew | Alexandria, VA

Kelly G. Caplan, Division Manager, Customer Engagement & Advocacy
WSSC Water | Laurel, MD

10:15 – 10:45

Networking Break

10:45 – 12:00

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions IV

Spotswood Arms

Option 1

Beyond the Numbers: How Best to Measure Utility Awareness and Performance

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Amanda Wegner, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District

Peacock Salon A/B

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2 Rate Increases, 1 Ballot: Lessons Learned from Utility Public Outreach

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Bethany Latham, AlexRenew

Amanda Waters, AlexRenew

Kelly G. Caplan, WSSC Water

12:15 – 1:30

Peacock Salon C

Luncheon

Fostering Belonging *(Separate RSVP Required)*

Hosted by the Women's Water Network – All Conference Participants are Welcome

Join us for a transformative and complimentary luncheon hosted by the *Women's Water Network*, and open to all Workshop participants, where we explore the theme *Fostering Belonging* within clean water utilities.

In the wake of the growing momentum behind Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, it's essential to create spaces where everyone feels valued, supported and empowered. Participants will receive practical tips and actionable takeaways to implement within their utility, including discovering the power of mentorship, learning how to be an effective advocate for your colleagues and creating a

welcoming environment where everyone can thrive. Together, we will explore strategies and best practices for nurturing a culture of inclusivity, where every voice is heard, and every perspective is honored. All *StratComm: H2O* registrants are welcome and encouraged to attend!

1:30 – 2:30

Peacock Foyer

Registration

1:45 – 4:00

Peacock Salon A/B

Plenary Session II

1:45 – 2:45

Two Sides of the Same Coin: Workforce Recruitment and Internal Communications

Recruiting and maintaining a skilled workforce is a significant challenge for clean water utilities, especially in today's job environment. Effective and compelling internal communications is critical to achieving this goal, both from a recruitment and retention perspective. Presentations during this session will explore some innovative approaches that utility comms professionals have used to both effectively communicate with existing staff and reach out to future employees.

Stefanie Burns, Public Affairs Specialist
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

Curtis Burris-White, Visual Storyteller
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

Leila Rice, Director of Communications
Hampton Roads Sanitation District | Virginia Beach, VA

Shawn Heselton, Chief of Interceptors Operations – South Shore
Hampton Roads Sanitation District | Virginia Beach, VA

2:45 – 3:00

Networking Break

3:00 – 4:00

Securing a Seat at the Table: Making Sure Communications is Part of Every Key Decision from the Start

Communications professionals play a vital role in any clean water utility. But too often, they are not included in major decisions about projects or rate increases that will impact the community until it is too late, resulting in internal last-minute requests to the comms department that do not allow enough time to effectively communicate the issue. This presentation will explore tips and advice on how to make sure the comms department is at the table from the very beginning.

Ellen Gordon, Public Affairs Specialist
Clean Water Services | Hillsboro, OR

Julie Cortez, Senior Public Affairs Specialist – Content & Media
Clean Water Services | Hillsboro, OR

4:00

Peacock Salon A/B

Closing Remarks

Nathan Gardner-Andrews, Chief Advocacy & Policy Officer
NACWA | Washington, DC