COMMUNICATING WITH RATEPAYERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Applying Enterprise Design Thinking to Clean Water Communications

BY JAMIE SAMONS | PROVIDENCE, RI

As communicators in the clean water sector, we try to bridge the gap between the technical and regulatory-driven language used by our engineers and the words our ratepayers and the general public will understand and appreciate. As NACWA and other advocacy groups have pointed out, some words work better than others when communicating and seeking public support for clean water issues. "Wet weather event", "biochemical oxygen demand", and even "infrastructure" or "resiliency" can sound like technical jargon to our audiences.

Of course, part of the disconnect stems from the fact that so much of what we do in the clean water world is rarely seen by our users, and when they do see us, it's often due to a crisis like a pipe collapse, plant failure, or combined sewer overflow.

At the Narragansett Bay Commission, we constantly ask ourselves, "How can we explain what we do in a way that has meaning for our ratepayers? For commercial fishermen? For beach-goers, boaters, and swimmers?" In a communications landscape dominated by social media, it's more important than ever to craft our language to be clear, concise, and meaningful. "What's the tweet?" is a common question around the (now virtual) table. Increasingly often lately, and especially since the coronavirus pandemic has curtailed our in-person activities in our community, we have turned to the tools of Enterprise Design Thinking.

Enterprise Design Thinking (EDT), developed by IBM, is a framework to align teams and to solve users' problems – in our case, the challenge to enable people who pay our sewer bills or are affected in any way by our operations to understand and appreciate where their rates go or why they are being disrupted. Despite its tech-y-sounding name, EDT centers outcomes around empathy for the user, whether that user is a ratepayer, a resident affected by sewer construction, or a student working on a science fair project.

The process of EDT is iterative and continuous, and includes space for failure and feedback. Ultimately, the work relies on three basic principles:

1. **Put user needs first.**
   We can't improve our users' experience or impression of our work if we don't have empathy for their circumstances and past experiences. When we craft a message, we ask what the ratepayer or affected person will think of it. When we determine what channels we use to disseminate the message – or even what day of the week or what time of day to use a specific channel – we consider our users' accessibility and patterns. Do we know that more people log on to Facebook in the morning? Twitter at mid-day? We can use that knowledge to increase our availability to our users.

2. **Everything is a prototype. Listen, learn, and course-correct.**
   "Fail fast and cheap" is a philosophy we don't often pursue in clean water, and understandably so: regulatory permits, environmental responsibility, and protection of public health all hang in the balance if we fail in our mission. But, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of our communications efforts, our ability to course-correct will enhance our efficacy. For example, input from audience surveys, polls (formal or informal), and focus-groups can guide our messaging and help us fine-tune the words and channels we use to communicate.

3. **Build multi-disciplinary teams to move faster and work harder.**
   We can communicate neither effectively nor empathetically if we lock ourselves in our communications tower. We need the varied perspectives of our operators, customer service representatives, engineers, lawyers, and accountants. We find that each member of the team contributes unique attributes to the Narragansett Bay Commission story. EDT reminds us that stories resonate with people much more than facts and figures, so if we can find a way to tell a story about a necessary infrastructure project, that will mean much more to our users than simply relaying the percent reduction in pollutants the project will effect.

A final key concept of EDT, **restless reinvention**, discourages us from a "one-and-done" mentality. In the same way that the water quality in Narragansett Bay continues to improve with our clean water activities, so also must our messaging continually evolve to adjust with empathy and humility to the needs of our users. In this way, we create an ongoing feedback loop of challenges and solutions that will forge a more meaningful relationship with our community.

For more information about Enterprise Design Thinking, visit www.ibm.com/design/thinking/page/framework.

Jamie Samons is the Public Affairs Manager at the Narragansett Bay Commission in Rhode Island.