

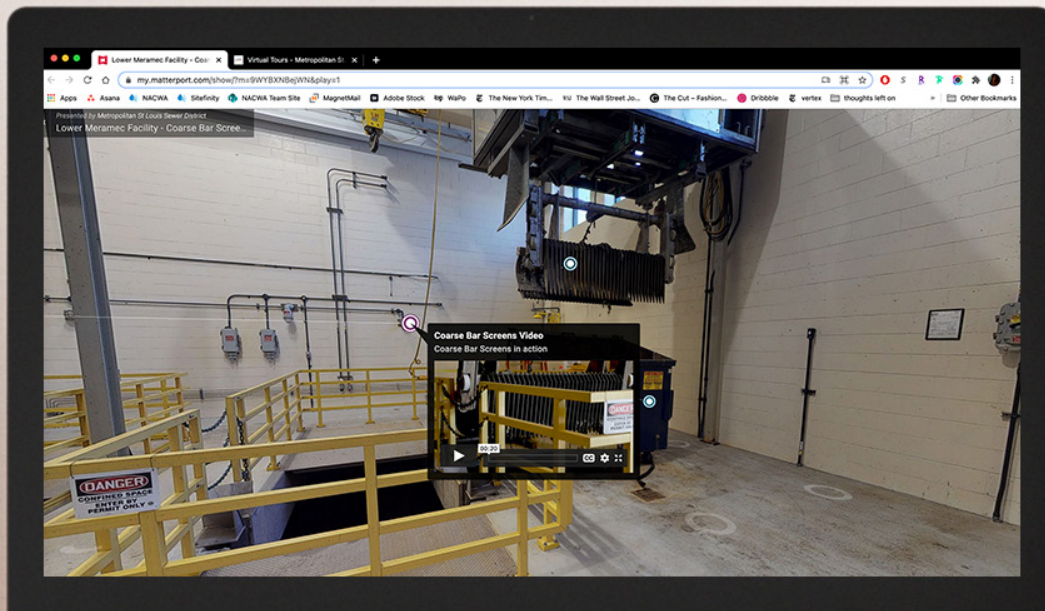
NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATING DURING
A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The New Normal: A Virtual Certainty?

BY SEAN J. STONE | ST. LOUIS, MO

“The new normal.” It’s a phrase you hear a lot these days. The phrasing isn’t actually new; it has been uttered literally countless times in newsrooms across the country over the past decade to describe the do-more-with-less trajectory of the news business amid declining traditional viewership. But now, “the new normal” is part of our national daily vocabulary. Here’s the cool thing, though: It doesn’t have to be bad.

It was Spring of 2020. A few of the businesses and schools in the St. Louis region were starting to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and MSD Project Clear was putting the first of many protective measures in place: there would be no face-to-face meetings with those outside of the organization unless absolutely necessary. My phone rang. It was one of our treatment plant managers who had gotten a call from a teacher interested in bringing a class to tour one of our seven plants and see how we treat water. “I’ve got a PowerPoint presentation on the process we show at the beginning of tours, but it’s kind of dry. Wouldn’t it be cool if we had like a virtual tour or something to share with them?” she said. Finally, a pricey and time-consuming project we’d been working on for months was going to have a chance to shine.



The idea predated me. Let's scan an entire treatment plant, inside and out, and post it on our website. Then, people can see what their rates are going toward, what we are doing, and how it is benefitting the community and the environment.

We started with a detailed tour, led by a plant manager who was truly an expert on every step of the process and was intimately familiar with every inch of the plant. Then, we took 360-degree scans at six-foot intervals of the entire plant. Then, we added info boxes. Then, we went back again and shot video of the processes in action. Then, we wrote, re-wrote and refined a series of scripts that could paint the full picture of the treatment process 30-60 seconds at a time. We walked the fine line between technical and understandable. We did our best to blend the educational with the artistic. We made darn sure to include all the nitty-gritty nasty visuals that make us all crack a smile anytime we "take a shortcut" across the press floor when a greenhorn visits a treatment facility. When we were done, we had created more than a virtual tour of a treatment plant; we'd created a virtual experience, complete with everything except the not-so-delightful aroma of wastewater treatment (maybe one day we'll have scratch-and-sniff screens too).

In the months since, the virtual tour has been taken by people from all walks of life. Students, teachers, contractors, the curious and more. It has been presented, featured and shared at a laundry list of virtual events. It has been, by any measure, a universal success for MSD Project Clear.

We could say it was a happy accident that this project was complete and went live in the earliest days of lockdowns and shelter-at-home orders. We could call it fortunate timing that we had a new virtual education tool at-the-ready at a time teachers and school administrators were scrambling to develop virtual curriculums on the fly. We could call it the right product for the right time. Or we can recognize that forward-thinking and a willingness to open our wallet positioned our organization for success. And that will continue to be the case in the future.

Soon, MSD Project Clear will unveil its second virtual experience: The Maline Creek Tunnel. It will give our customers their first chance to really experience a 28-foot finished diameter, 3/4-mile-long storage



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tunnel that's 200-feet underground. They will be able to see every curve, seam and chamber, learn how it works, and how it will keep waterways cleaner. This is invaluable as MSD Project Clear moves forward with some of the most ambitious and pricey clean water projects in our region's history.

With multiple vaccines now available and more on the cusp of emergency use authorization or FDA approval, our daily lives will soon start to look and feel more normal. But the reality is there will likely be an increased emphasis on working remotely and learning remotely in the future. That is "the new normal." And clean water agencies would be well-served to be out in front of that trend, instead of playing catch-up and trying to muscle their way into a crowded space down the road.

Explore the Lower Meramec Treatment Plant at www.MSDProjectClear.org/VirtualTour.

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