

Tales from Quarantine: Pandemic Fatigue and Toilet Paper as a News Hook

BY TRICIA GARRISON | GREEN BAY, WI

During the darkest winter days in Green Bay, Wisconsin, quarantine fatigue had set in. We'd all gotten a bout of "cooped-up-itis," and it was time to mix up our outreach efforts.

Our Team wanted to gently remind the neighbors that we're here, working around the clock, so you can flush, do laundry, and take a shower whenever you please. Here are a few tips and tricks that we used.



1. DOG EAR YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN

In the middle of a pandemic, in a tricky situation, how do you see your way out? Take a breath, and go back to your Strategic Plan. After a peculiar twist of public events this winter, we found ourselves in need of telling our story, in a timely fashion, and as widely as possible. So, we consulted our Strategic Plan: "Empower stakeholders with education to advocate." Unable to bring folks in for a tour, to personally visit people, or make large-scale public presentations, we produced a suite of digital materials, and we asked, and empowered, our stakeholders to spread the word about "10 Things to Know About NEW Water." This package contained a video (produced by our talented Public Affairs & Education Team, Erin Collar and Hannah Malmberg) featuring "Out of Sight Essential Workers." We linked the package to our holiday cards, posted to our blog, pushed it out on social, and engaged our stakeholders. This included courting media attention.

2. A NEWS HOOK THAT WORKED: TOILET PAPER

Remember when people were freaking out over toilet paper, hoarding and causing shortages in the pandemic's early days? We used that as a news hook for our 'out of sight' essential workers story. To further build our brand, we produced a NEW Water Zoom backdrop for the TV interview with our Treatment Manager, Bruce Bartel. (Note: Luckily, we tested it before we went on air! Bruce's gray shirt did not



render at all – making him look like his head was floating on the clarifying basin behind him! Luckily, he was able to change prior to the interview.) After the story aired, we received a 117% increase in website traffic. Facebook comments include “Wow! Did not know this! Very appreciative of their hard work!” and my favorite: “We really do take clean water for granted in this country.”

3. GROSS IS GOOD

The toilet paper shortage taught us a powerful lesson: Gross works. For years, we had been using lovely “clean” imagery to politely implore people to stop treating their toilets like a trash can. When we heard that people were using paper towels instead of toilet paper, we left polite in the dust, and went “gross.” It worked. Our “gross” social media PSA (globs of wipes, grease, and other unflushables in all their glory) went viral. We are currently collecting specific gross photos throughout our interceptor system, with enthusiastic municipal partners to produce targeted PSAs.

4. EVOLVE WITH YOUR PARTNERS

Our annual Boys & Girls Club STEM Superheroes Camp is a hit with the children, as well as our staff. Aaron Eichhorst, Treatment Lead, plays the role of “Commander Cleanwater,” leading kids to protect our water from evil villains, “Sinister Sediment,” “Phosphorus Phury,” and “Unflushables,” using STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills taught in camp. The Club was keen to work with us to keep the momentum, regardless of the pandemic. We brainstormed. The Club was planning an on-site trash clean-up, so we created a digital educational package for teachers and campers about Wisconsin water, illustrating how picking up trash helps keep area waters clean. The “virtual” camp allowed us to stay connected with a valued community partner.

Tricia Garrison is the Public Affairs and Education Manager for NEW Water, the brand of the Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District in Wisconsin.