

Simple Water Education Videos Improve Public Outreach

Nick Salemi



The Metropolitan District's water supply consists of a surface water supply system of reservoirs that includes the 30.3 billion gallon Barkhamsted Reservoir and the 9.5 billion gallon Nepaug Reservoir (shown here). When full, the two reservoirs store a volume of water (39.8 billion gallons) equivalent to 664 days (22 months) of typical water use. *Photo by MDC*

Although stories of drought-related water shortages and flooding are common in the headlines these days, helping customers understand and appreciate their water and sewer systems can be challenging. Aging pipes, pumps, and treatment plants aren't riveting topics for many, and most of the infrastructure is buried underground, so as the saying goes, it's out of sight and out of mind.

Conveying Water's Value

When connecting with the public, water professionals can sometimes rattle off impressive factoids about infrastructure, but this isn't a great way to get people to understand the value of their systems and their water. Alternatively,

one of the best ways to open the public's eyes to what water professionals do every day is to have them visit a reservoir or treatment plant, but not many have time to make these trips.

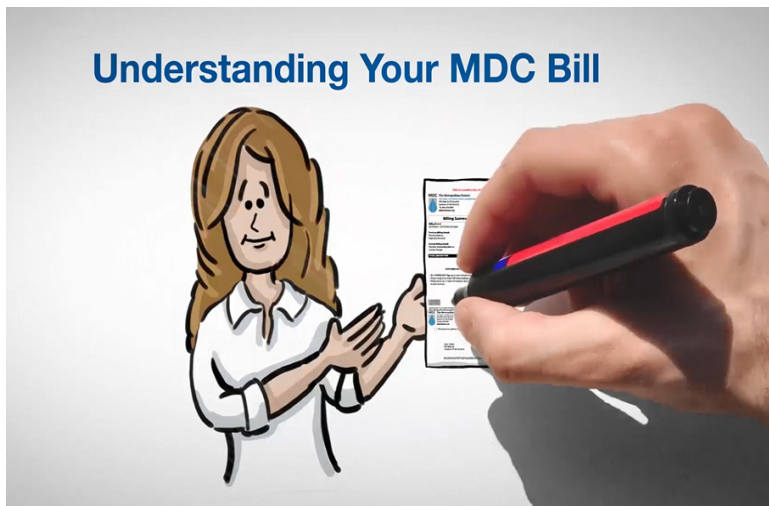
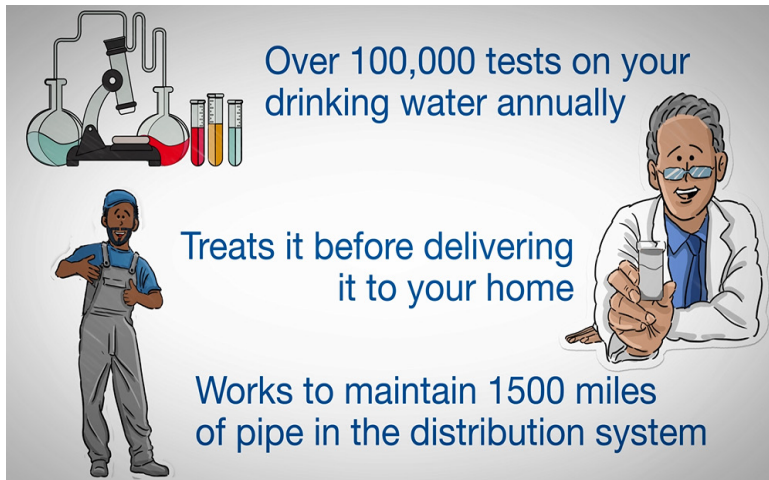
With a massive wastewater infrastructure upgrade underway, The Metropolitan District (MDC)—the municipal water and sewer authority for the Capitol region of Hartford, Conn.—wanted to get information out quickly in a way that would be easy for its customers to digest. MDC's success in its efforts is an example for other utilities and the district earned a 2021 Public Communications Achievement Award from AWWA as a result.

Created in 1929, MDC serves a population of approximately 400,000 people, most of whom live in the capital city of Hartford and seven surrounding towns. The district has about 450 employees and 100,000 customer accounts, and it operates two surface water reservoirs, two water treatment plants, the largest wastewater treatment plant in Connecticut, and three satellite plants.

As the state's only regional water and sewer provider, MDC has a robust outreach program that focuses on topics ranging from basic customer service and billing issues to construction

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The Metropolitan District's Animated Whiteboard-Style Videos



The animated videos cover a range of topics, including drinking water and wastewater services (top) and customer billing (bottom).

Communication Barriers Discovered

MDC received feedback during its outreach efforts regarding the CWP and its next phase, which involves an integrated planning approach. Stakeholders at public information meetings, town council presentations, and even MDC's own board of commissioners meetings said that many of MDC's presentations and materials were often difficult for average customers to understand. Although rich in information, that information was sometimes too technical.

In addition, while MDC focused on the somewhat engineering-heavy aspects of the CWP, it was clear that customers did not understand some of MDC's basic functions. The most glaring example was that some customers were unaware that MDC provided sewer services in addition to drinking water. One reason for this is that MDC bills customers for sewer service via an *ad valorem* charge that is based on property values; it goes directly to the towns and cities receiving the sewer service and is then built into municipal taxes. As a result, customers do not receive a direct bill for their sewer services.

On the sewer side of MDC's operations, the CWP has been in progress for about 15 years (and has been proposed for another 30). However, the project is

Figure 1

projects, the annual budget process, and informational forums for a wide-ranging group of customers and stakeholders. However, it was the outreach needed for the Clean Water Project (CWP), a US\$2 billion combined sewer overflow mitigation program, that really made MDC's Communications Department evolve. Two separate \$800 million referendums on the project's first two phases passed by margins of more than 70%; still, there was more work to do.

billed as part of MDC customers' water bills. In fact, the charge is and has been the largest portion of customers' water bills for the past few years. Although water rates remained the lowest among large water companies in Connecticut, the CWP charge had more than doubled the total bill. Getting customers to understand why they were paying for a sewer infrastructure upgrade on a water bill was complicated. Articulating this presented a challenge, as did the particularly nuanced concept of

explaining that a steady decline in water usage (and in turn revenues) over the past decade could actually mean an increase in rates.

Solution: “Whiteboard-Style” Videos

With support from management, MDC’s Communications Department made a series of short, easy-to-understand videos that could be used across multiple platforms for a diverse group of stakeholders (Figure 1). The videos, each ranging from one to two minutes long, explore aspects of MDC that directly affect customers.

The animated whiteboard-style videos were designed to clarify many aspects of MDC’s business:

- How sewer services are billed and how those charges are separate from the CWP
- MDC’s most basic functions, such as drinking water and wastewater services
- Factors that affect water and sewer rates
- The benefits of integrated planning for managing infrastructure
- Overall environmental stewardship
- Customer billing

Along with direct customers, the target audience included municipal officials such as town and city council members, mayors and town managers, state officials (senators, representatives, executive branch representatives, and regulators), and the local media.

Effective Video Placement Strategy

MDC’s whiteboard videos were used to lead off presentations to all eight separate town councils in the district’s service area, and the feedback was immediate. Those elected officials, along with the general public at MDC board meetings and state legislators at a water rate meeting (all videotaped and broadcasted public meetings), said the videos highlighted or clarified several issues, such as drivers of rate increases and how the *ad valorem* tax payment system works.

The videos were custom-made for social media and now are some of MDC’s most viewed, liked, and forwarded content. They reach thousands of customers and cross-reference each social media platform, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

An easy way to distribute the videos was making them part of MDC’s website, posting them in the newsfeed as well as making them available on pages throughout the site. The whiteboard videos were designed for long-term use and made as “future-proof” as possible, with no easily outdated information. The videos also were used to answer frequently asked questions posed to MDC’s customer service representatives. Website metrics analysis demonstrated that this video placement strategy was effective.

MDC’s whiteboard videos were also distributed through local public access television stations in MDC’s service area. Several stations agreed to air the content as public service announcements between their regularly scheduled programming. In addition, some stations made the videos available for direct download from their websites.

Paid media placement was also a component of MDC’s overall strategy. The videos were used as links in targeted online advertisements in multiple digital news publications in MDC’s service area to achieve nearly 1.5 million interactions. Over the course of several months, this approach reached an entirely different audience. There was also significant coverage by local media of the video campaign, which helped validate MDC’s efforts and contributed to making the organization more transparent.

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MDC’s whiteboard videos have been so successful and well received, both internally and externally, that they have since become a fixture in MDC’s public outreach. MDC also uses documentary-style videos to communicate updates on projects and programs; meanwhile, the whiteboard videos have become essential in getting information out quickly, in a format that can be easily produced, updated, and improved. The whiteboard videos are also used proactively to convey messaging about new programs and initiatives as well as questions and issues brought up by customers. 💧

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