



**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
RECOMMENDATIONS
AND
MESSAGE PLATFORM**

Developed by



WATER MESSAGING IN CONTEXT

Developing strong messages to build public support and political will for addressing New Jersey’s water infrastructure presents a mix of opportunities and difficulties.

On the plus side, no one goes through a day without getting the benefits of water. And in some parts of the state, the problems our water infrastructure faces often are apparent, too – especially after it rains.

But, it’s all too easy to enjoy water’s benefits without having to think about why or how it happens. You turn on the tap and there it is. Roads that *don’t* flood after storms, sewage that *doesn’t* enter waterways, pipes that *don’t* leak are out of sight and out of mind. Plus, among those who might be even somewhat aware of the need to upgrade water infrastructure there is that daunting price tag that encourages putting off serious thought.

So, in large measure, the messaging challenge is to call people’s attention to problems they likely don’t know exist and that would require money the public isn’t anxious to spend.

When and if there is a full-scale campaign on behalf of fixing the state’s water problems – say a bond issue question on the ballot with millions of dollars behind it – the messaging and accompanying visual imagery won’t be hard to conjure. In the meantime, it falls to Jersey Water Works to raise awareness as much as possible in the service of common-sense policy ideas that, without a doubt, would make New Jersey a safer, healthier, more prosperous state.

“Why Before “What”

It’s always useful to lead an elevator speech or other communication with why something is needed, and water easily lends itself to this treatment.

The “why” of water is a tangible, positive, appealing aspect of messaging.

It is important for the messaging to resonate within an existing frame of reference. The messaging should hook into public knowledge, concerns, and perceptions — rather than appearing to create its own, less relatable context.

This holds true for water, as well. So, whether it’s why the public and policy makers need to pay more attention to water infrastructure, why Jersey Water Works does what it does, or why more people should get on board, leading with “why” offers the opportunity to start the conversation in a place where most people already are – which is crucial to getting them where you want them to go.

Answering Questions People are Asking

If only more people in New Jersey were asking questions like, “How can we fix the problems of combined sewer systems?”

Until that day arrives, we still have messaging techniques that can help bolster the “why before what” approach by putting water infrastructure in a context the public already senses.

Public health is one. So are the economy and the quality of life that comes from clean drinking water, as well as swimming, boating, fishing, and other water-related activities iconic among New Jerseyans. And, when water infrastructure problems curtail the freedom to participate in these activities, people aren’t happy. So, it’s important, and doable, to open people’s minds to the notion that problems with water infrastructure have such a far-reaching impact.

This will make the messaging more relevant than if it focuses on little known, underappreciated technical elements of water. That’s what we mean by answering questions people are already asking.

The work Jersey Water Works does is so important to real public concerns that it is hardly a stretch to discuss that work in a way that the general public will understand.

Unified, Compelling Messages

Though at this point Jersey Water Works doesn’t have the opportunity of speaking to a massive, statewide audience, it does have the benefit of being a collaboration of highly informed, seriously motivated people when it comes to the topic of the state’s water infrastructure. This is an asset whose effectiveness can be maximized through messaging that is unified and compelling.

By “unified,” we mean that all members, in all venues, deliver a core message that doesn’t vary in its overarching description of the organization’s goals, the problems it aims to solve, and the broad solution. This would still leave plenty of room for customizing the messaging in two major ways:

- According to the interests and knowledge of audiences
- According to the backgrounds and experience of the Jersey Water Works members delivering the message

We want the messaging to empower Jersey Water Works members by giving them a tight, persuasive narrative to share and at the same time give them the latitude to add their own elements – including an “ask” that varies with the situation and relatable stories, examples, anecdotes, etc.

By “compelling,” we mean that the rhetorical volume of the messaging should be turned up a few notches to pique audience interest by exposing the problems and solutions in simpler, more graphic language. We don’t mean to say Jersey Water Works should employ the “scare tactics” approach. We do mean that some language could be tweaked to drive the discussion further.

Here’s one example: It says on the website that Jersey Water “is working to transform New Jersey’s inadequate water infrastructure...”

The primary definition of “transform” is “to change in form, appearance, or structure; metamorphose.” Though that is what Jersey Water Works seeks to do, in a sense, we suggest a more direct word would be “fix” – a word that more strongly suggests there is a problem.

Don’t Show Me the Money

Don’t highlight the \$25 billion cost of upgrading the state’s water infrastructure. In general, it’s important that dollar amounts not enter the discussion until audiences are made aware of the goal and the problem. The figure should be a second- or third-tier supporting point rather than a headline. Though this goes beyond Taft’s mandate, we suggest the “carousel” atop the Jersey Water Works website homepage not include the \$25 billion item.

In the message platform, you’ll see that we stay away from any numbers. Data such as the number of gallons of treated water leaked in a day are good supporting points. Thinking back to “why before what,” recall that numbers lack context and while they might inform, they don’t inspire action.

Don’t Blame the Victims (and Maybe Not the Perpetrators Either)

We want to be careful not to come across as scolding the public – or blaming policy makers – for the dangerous lack of attention to water issues over the years.

If there were a plausible villain, it might be worth exploiting that person or thing.

But, while, policy makers arguably have been less than diligent on this issue, the need for their support would seem to outweigh gains that could come from piling on politicians or other government officials. Having said that, when messaging is tailored to particular situations, it could be beneficial to cite the poor stewardship of some local water systems as warranted.

Tap into Emotions

If the technical aspects of water infrastructure are less than inspiring, water does evoke strong emotions, and we’d want to explore ways to tap into that – through aspirational/celebratory language, in addition to the troublesome nature of the problems and the dangers of continued inaction.

THE MESSAGE PLATFORM

We find Taft’s “messaging in three acts” formulation to be effective in making sure that elevator speeches and similar communications use the three elements commonly found in “hero’s journey” stories to establish common ground, generate interest, and stir people to action. Based on the wide range of water-related issues important to Jersey Water Works members, the platform should be customizable. In particular, ACTs II and III should consist mostly of problems and solutions that are specific to an organization and its principal work. In any given conversation, a JWW member could have a different third act that would advance both a problem-specific solution and the collaborative’s broader purpose.

ACT I – Goals/aspiration/values (this will give all JWW members a consistent, aspirational message that unifies the aims of the collaborative and builds a foundation for what comes next)

It’s impossible to overstate the importance of water to New Jersey’s health, economy, and quality of life. The water we drink, use in manufacturing, swim in or boat on is essential to our state’s very being.

ACT II – Problems (use as much or as little of this as your issues warrant, then move to a brief, compelling description of the problem you want people to address)

For too long, though, we’ve been able to take water for granted.

When we turn on the faucet or, yes, flush the toilet, we haven’t had to think much about where our water comes from or where it’s going.

That needs to change, right away. Years-long lack of attention to New Jersey’s water infrastructure – a mostly unseen network of pipes, pumps, sewers, tunnels, drains, etc. – threatens our communities’ ability to thrive.

After rainstorms, flooding hampers commutes and slows commerce. Raw sewage dumped into waterways offends our senses and threatens health. More than ever, people wonder just what’s in the water they drink.

ACT III – Solutions (after the first three sentences, move to your particular solution and what you’re asking of your audience)

It’s time to fix New Jersey’s inadequate water infrastructure.

We can do it in sustainable and cost-effective ways.

We need to do it before things get even worse, before we face a disaster.

Suggested openers: For example.../ That’s why I’m asking your support for.../ Here’s something we can all get behind.../ In our [community, city, etc.] that means.../ Our top priority needs to be.../ Please join us in the effort to...

Potential Supporting Points

These are examples of things to say to support, clarify, and illustrate the elevator speech/message platform. We got most of these from the Jersey Water Works website.

There is no limit to the possibilities that Jersey Water Works members could come up with, based on their own knowledge, experience, and contacts.

- Water systems in some areas are more than 100 years old, with pipes that leak or break, and are unable to handle the increasing volume that comes with successful urban revitalization.
- New Jersey's water infrastructure needs \$25 billion in upgrades over the next 20 years.
- Older cities and towns throughout New Jersey face a public health crisis – lead in drinking water. The most common source of lead in tap water is from the curb-to-home service line, lead solder at pipe joints, and faucets. That shouldn't be the case. Every household should have water free of lead and other pollutants.
- Every year, sewer systems dump 7 billion gallons of raw sewage into NJ waterways.
- New Jersey's leaking pipes lose 130 million gallons of treated water per day.
- Every dollar invested in water infrastructure generates \$2.62 in all industries.
- When surface runoff and sewage water both go to the same place, serious pollution and health problems result when the volume exceeds the capacity of treatment plants. No one builds these combined systems anymore, but many communities haven't replaced their dangerous old system.
- Climate change will only make our water problems, especially those that relate to stormwater, harder to solve.
- New Jersey has the most people of any state whose drinking water contains an unhealthy level of PFAs. Since the crisis in Flint, Michigan raised awareness, utilities serving 1.5 million New Jerseyans have failed tests.
- As cities in our state continue to grow, water infrastructure continues to age. Our communities and our economy can't thrive with outdated, inadequate systems.
- We need to see water as a human right. We all deserve safe, affordable drinking water.

- Less than 10 minutes of rain can trigger a CSO event. The result – untreated raw sewage dumping into our rivers and streams or backing up onto our streets and in our basements.
- Landscape plays an important role in water management. Flowers and other plants can effectively, and aesthetically, slow water movement and reduce stormwater runoff.

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