



Have you ever been excited to share information with a group of stakeholders and then were disappointed when no one seemed to care? When this happens, do you need to mount a public information effort or undertake a public education program? One might ask, "What's the difference?" According to guest columnist Jackie Glover, there is indeed a clear distinction. In this Tip Sheet, she explains how to achieve more successful outcomes by understanding the differentiation between public information and public education endeavors.

## PE Tip Sheet No. 30:

# Public Information versus Public Education— Is There a Difference?



By Jackie Glover

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Public information and education are initiatives that many utilities undertake on a regular basis. In most cases, these terms are used interchangeably to describe both types of outreach efforts, but with meager, unproductive outcomes from programs and low-attended events, clearly a unique definition seems to emerge for each.

The public information model of public relations was developed from about 1900 into the 1920s. The primary purpose of this model was simply for the dissemination of information, not necessarily with a persuasive intent.<sup>1</sup>

Utility managers spend several thousand dollars annually planning public meetings and events to provide information on the important issues that affect them and their various audiences; however, very few people attend those well-planned events. Perhaps the problem isn't that the event is not well organized or widely publicized, but that the public hasn't asked for that particular piece of knowledge.

As the issues facing water utilities become more and more complex with far-reaching implications for the utilities' publics,

education has taken on a more essential role. A public education program should provide a comprehensive approach to educating the utilities' publics on those issues that have an impact on their lives and well being.

For our purposes then, we can define *public information* as knowledge the public has asked for and *public education* as knowledge they have not asked for but should know.

Understanding what your audiences want to know becomes very important. Exactly what that is can vary by region. Public information in Redding, California, may be public education in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Customer surveys are an excellent tool to glean which topics are most important to your various audiences. Through the survey process, utilities can also find out how their audiences want to hear more about those topics and how frequently they want to hear about them. For example, the results of an AwwaRF study details the most-asked-for information water consumers wanted from their utility.<sup>2</sup> A basis public information program could incorporate your utility's response to those topics. Short messages can

be placed on the water bill, a "Did You Know" fact sheet, or a simple bill stuffer.

On the other hand, public education involves teaching to increase awareness on an issue. For public education efforts to be successful, we need to know and understand how adults learn. Programs can then be created and presented in a variety of settings and formats to accommodate the different types of learning styles.

Programs can be conducted in a variety of venues, such as community centers, adult learning centers, schools, businesses, and health care facilities. They can be coordinated through community-based organizations and block clubs, a speakers' bureau or a scheduled combined community learning activity. They can be presented utilizing interactive games and CD-ROMs. Utilities can also use their Web site and a customer newsletter to provide snippets of information and to publicize education efforts.

Targeting *public information* outreach efforts to match the knowledge your audiences have asked for and *public education* for those issues that are important to your utility, and that your audiences need to know may just result in better, more successful outcomes. ◊

<sup>1</sup> Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, New York, NY: HarperCollinsPublishers

<sup>2</sup> AwwaRF, *Customer Attitudes, Behaviors, and the Impact of Communication Efforts*, Denver, CO: AWWARF

## Speaking Out

Continued from page 34

a technical base to influence major water initiatives and policy for the state. Today the section is still well positioned to exert political courage and leadership in the water arena. Which of our future actions can be unlocked to drive innovation?

It will take political courage to speak to

the real issues of fact, special interests, fundamental values, and jurisdictional authority. The non-governmental organizations concerned with environmental sustainability have seats at the table. Government agencies at all levels have seats at the table. Opinion leaders have seats at the table. And, most important, future generations must be represented at the table.

For all of us, it is time to review our

organizational agendas, invest more in our universities, engage in our Florida's Water Future, and to listen with empathy to those with differing opinions and viewpoints. The resulting insights might surprise us. ◊

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this column draw upon an article by Sanford Berg (2007), "Conflict Resolution: Benchmarking Water Utility Performance," Public Administration and Development, pp. 7-11.