

COVID-19: Communication Strategies for the Water Sector

ISSUE: TOILETS ARE NOT TRASHCANS

One of the earliest stories about the coronavirus pandemic in the United States was the sudden stockpiling of toilet paper. Stores ran out quickly, and people began substituting paper towels and baby wipes. These products do not break down easily and are not meant to be flushed. Over the coming weeks, there was an uptick in clogged sewer lines and plumbing systems across the country. People have been using more disinfectant wipes to clean and disinfect their homes, and these have now been contributing to backups and clogged sewers too. Education campaigns about what not to flush down the toilet long predate the coronavirus pandemic, but this crisis has shone a spotlight on the issue.

The Value of Water Campaign prepared this fact sheet to provide communications tips to help people understand what they can and can't flush down the toilet and why. It also highlights some great examples of how supporters of the Value of Water Campaign use successful approaches through social media. More examples can be found on the Value of Water Campaign [COVID Response Page](#).

We hope this round-up of tips and examples helps empower water sector stakeholders to communicate and educate their communities on their wastewater systems.

Dispel the Flushable Myth

Labels on many varieties of bathroom wipes read "flushable," even though wipes contribute to clogs and equipment problems downstream. As sales of wipes marketed as flushable have increased, so have their impacts on waste-water utilities. Messages should dispel the myth about flushable wipes by acknowledging that the label may say "flushable," but that's in fact not true. And then explain why: they don't break down like toilet paper, they clog sewers, they can bind with grease and other materials to create enormous blockages (sometimes called "fatbergs,") and they are expensive and very unpleasant to remove.

By acknowledging that the packaging claims wipes are flushable and then countering that claim with information emphasizing wipes' damage, utilities can help educate consumers.



Acknowledge consumers' experiences.

Many customers are overwhelmed by the shortage of paper products and the greater need for household cleaning. Thinking about what they put in their toilet is likely not a top priority. By acknowledging their customers' realities, utilities can show empathy and build trust before encouraging them to not flush wipes or paper towels.

Show why this matters (it's okay to lean into the gross factor!)

Pictures of sewer backups are worth a thousand words. Most people who flush wipes at home aren't thinking about the long-term impact on the system. Photos of enormous fatbergs and tangled messes getting extracted from pipes and equipment are effective partly because they are gross. Disgust has been shown in many studies to increase memory and impact of information. Humans are wired to pay attention to disgusting things.

Interact and answer questions.

Social media is a great way to connect with customers and answer questions. Monitor for, and quickly answer, questions that come in, or consider soliciting questions as Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer did in the example below. Make sure you prepare your social media staff to answer questions about wipes and provide accurate, straight-forward information.

Demonstrate personal impact of flushing wipes.

While the impact on wastewater systems may not be persuasive for some consumers, it may move others to action when they become aware of the personal impact of flushing wipes. By making the damage wipes can cause immediately relevant to consumers—no one wants a backed-up toilet—utilities can drive the point home.

Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District @MMSD_MKE · Mar 24

"Sewage systems and toilets are backing up as consumers clean their homes with disinfectant wipes and turn to paper towels, napkins and baby wipes to cope with the lack of toilet paper."

Only flush the 3 P's! #wipesclogpipes

Americans Coping With the Coronavirus Are Clogging Toilets
Sewage systems and toilets are backing up as consumers clean their homes with disinfectant wipes and turn to paper towels, napkins and ...
nytimes.com

Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority @pgh2o · Mar 26

What goes down your toilet can cause major problems for your home and our sewer system. Only flush #1, #2, and toilet paper. Everything else goes in the trash.

Use humor and pop culture references to connect with consumers.

While COVID-19 poses very serious threats to our public health, humor, when framed appropriately, can be an important way to make wipes a resonant issue with consumers. There is a growing body of research that suggests that contextual humor can be an effective tactic for social change communication. It's also a way to overcome an initial reaction of disgust to an unpleasant topic.

LouisvilleMSD @louisvillemsd · Mar 30

It's 9 am. Maybe it's Monday, maybe it's Thursday. Really, who knows anymore?

Whenever it is, though, here's your reminder to #Sticktothe3Ps and ONLY flush pee, poo & toilet paper.

PS: Wash your hands. Keep your distance. Be kind to each other. We're in this together.

KC Water @KCMOWater · Mar 27

#FridayThoughts We should create another meme to share why "flushable" wipes are dangerous and costly to #wastewater systems. They belong in the trash, not the toilet. #WipesClogPipes

Share resources for all ages.

Consider sharing resources for people of all ages. Activities for children can help the newest toilet-users of a household learn the importance of only flushing the three P's: pee, poo, and (toilet) paper. Many parents are home with their school-aged children and will appreciate ready-made educational activities, such as coloring pages, science experiments, and more.



Additional Resources

Fowler, Will. "Water Sector Request: Flush Wisely." *Water Environment Federation: The Water Quality People*. 2020. <https://www.wef.org/news-hub/wef-news/water-sector-request-flush-wisely/>.

"Is it okay to flush disinfecting wipes?" *US Environmental Protection Agency*. March 30, 2020. <https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/it-okay-flush-disinfecting-wipes>.

"Toilets Are Not Trashcans: Only Flush the 3 P's: Pee, Poop, & Toilet Paper." *NACWA*. 2020. <https://www.nacwa.org/advocacy-analysis/campaigns/toilets-are-not-trashcans>.

"Toilets Are Not Trashcans: Take the Pledge." *Toilets Are Not Trashcans*. <https://www.flush3p.org/#take-the-pledge>.

About the Value of Water Campaign

The Value of Water Campaign educates and inspires the nation about how water is essential, invaluable, and in need of investment. Spearheaded by top leaders in the water industry, the Value of Water Campaign is building public and political will for investment in America's water infrastructure. To learn more: www.thevalueofwater.org.

If you would like to learn more, share ideas, or get involved with the Value of Water Campaign, please contact **Katie Henderson, Program Manager**: khenderson@uswateralliance.org.