

A woman in a white top stands at the front of a room, addressing a group of people. Several audience members in the foreground have their hands raised, indicating an interactive session or a Q&A period. The background is a bright, modern interior with large windows.

Stakeholder Understanding and Support for Rural and Small Systems

Now that you have completed your *Rural and Small Systems* “Self-Assessment” exercise and determined that Stakeholder Understanding and Support is important to your utility, this handout can help you get started on improving your Stakeholder Understanding and Support practices. It describes some of the key “Building Blocks” of successful stakeholder engagement for small utilities, giving you a starting place to improve stakeholder engagement practices. The handout also includes specific suggestions on how to measure a utility’s stakeholder engagement, and lists a number of free resources with practical information on how to improve practices. For more information on the Stakeholder Understanding and Support management area, please refer to the *Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management*.

STAKEHOLDER UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT: The system actively seeks understanding and support from decision making bodies, community members, and regulatory bodies related to service levels, operating budgets, capital improvement programs, and risk management decisions. It takes appropriate steps with these stakeholders to build support for its performance goals, resources, and the value of the services that it provides. The system performs active outreach and education to understand concerns and promote the value of clean, safe water and the services the utility provides, consistent with available resources.

– *Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management*

Additional Information

EPA website: <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/tools-effective-water-and-wastewater-utility-management>

USDA website: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/services/sustainable-management-tools>



Building Blocks of Stakeholder Understanding and Support

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Community engagement is necessary to educate stakeholders on the value of the utility and to build support for utility operations. These skills and practices provide the foundation to position the utility as a valued institution in the community. Foundational practices include participation in community events, volunteering, and sponsorships.

EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES

- Participate in community events (e.g., utility staff volunteer at fundraising events)
- Organize utility open house events
- Host community engagement forums to understand critical community values, set utility goals, and review infrastructure projects
- Co-sponsor community events with other local organizations related to water or watershed protection to increase the public visibility of water.

WHO ARE YOUR “STAKEHOLDERS?”

A stakeholder is any individual or group that has an interest in or is impacted by the operations or future of the utility (e.g., community decision makers, board members, ratepayers, other residents of the community).

EDUCATION AND PROMOTION

A communications plan is an important step in achieving community understanding of the utility and support for its work. First, a utility must ensure that basic information about the utility is readily accessible and understandable to community members. A utility can also work to change or strengthen the relationships with media and the portrayal of the utility through engagement with media on positive utility activities.

EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES

- Include information about major projects/initiatives and important documents on the website
- Create multiple-language utility documents consistent with community profile
- Draft emergency event public communications templates for media contacts (e.g., create standardized text for boil water notices)
- Conduct annual consumer confidence/water quality report
- Publish value of water and water services educational brochures
- Organize public education campaigns
- Conduct school outreach programs (e.g., K–12 classroom presentations or local school science program water-related curriculum)

CUSTOMER AND STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE

Gathering stakeholder feedback and accurately assessing utility response is an important step in successfully engaging stakeholders and growing support for utility operations. Creating customer complaint and response mechanisms is a crucial first step in establishing trust with the community.

EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES

- Establish customer complaint response time targets
- Identify key community stakeholder opinion leaders list and schedule for outreach to each (e.g., phone calls, informal meeting)
- Create a customer information system to store billing information, service requests, and all resolutions

Measures

To gather information on stakeholder understanding and support, it is important to have a method of measuring and tracking community engagement, public relations, and customer feedback. Below several measurement areas are described, with specific example metrics or activities for each area.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION AND COMMUNITY PARTNERING

This measure addresses utility actions to reach out to and consult with stakeholders about utility matters, including utility goals, objectives, and management decisions. It also assesses how the utility engages with other partners in the community.

EXAMPLE METRICS

- Does the utility identify stakeholders, conduct outreach, and actively consult with stakeholders about utility matters? (yes/no)
- Number of active contacts with stakeholders in key areas (e.g., from local government, business, education, non-governmental groups).
- Frequency with which the utility actively consults with stakeholders.
- Number of projects completed associated with community partnerships.

MEDIA/PRESS COVERAGE

A utility can better understand stakeholder awareness and support by better understanding the media portrayal of the utility (newspaper, TV, radio, etc.) in terms of awareness, accuracy, and tone.

EXAMPLE METRICS

- Amount of coverage: Total number of media stories (social media, newspaper, TV, radio, etc.) concerning the utility per year.
- Media coverage tone (percent): $100 \times (\text{number of media stories concerning the utility that portray the utility in a positive way} \div \text{total number of media stories concerning the utility})$ per year.

STAKEHOLDER SATISFACTION

Understanding stakeholder perceptions of and satisfaction with your utility is an important step in successfully engaging stakeholders and growing support for your utility. Stakeholder satisfaction can be measured through surveys sent to stakeholders, formal feedback surveys distributed to stakeholders at events, etc.

EXAMPLE METRICS

- Overall satisfaction (percent): $100 \times (\text{number of stakeholders who annually rate the overall job of the utility as positive} \div \text{total number of stakeholders surveyed})$.
- Responsiveness (percent): $100 \times (\text{number of stakeholders who annually rate utility responsiveness to stakeholder needs as positive} \div \text{total number of stakeholders surveyed})$.
- Comparative rate rank (how utility rates compare to similar utilities): Typical monthly bill for average household as a percentage of typical monthly bills for similar utilities

Example Practices for Stakeholder Understanding and Support at Rural and Small Systems

The practices listed below are drawn from the [Rural and Small Systems Guidebook](#) and the [Moving Toward Sustainability Roadmap](#) document. They are examples of practices that utilities have implemented to improve their performance in the area of Stakeholder Understanding and Support.

Perform active customer and stakeholder outreach and education.

Establish active level of service goals to set performance measures for the utility, share with customers.

Set customer complaint response time targets.

Use free space in bills to provide important information to customers.

Produce an annual consumer confidence/water quality report.

Create clear, visible signs for construction activities.

Resources

Highlighted below are several practical and free resources that provide information for utilities on how to improve stakeholder engagement practices. For a longer list of resources that provide more information on specific areas of utility management, please see the *Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management: Appendix III*.

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/RuralandSmallSystemsGuidebook2016.pdf>

Moving Toward Sustainability: Sustainable and Effective Practices for Creating Your Water Utility Roadmap

This document helps utilities identify successful practices to improve their operations at a pace in line with community and utility needs. Level 1 practices highlighted in the “Customer Satisfaction and Stakeholder Understanding & Support” section of this document are a good starting place for utilities looking to update their basic customer and stakeholder-related practices.

http://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-04/documents/sustainable_practices_utilities_roadmap_crwu.pdf

Getting in Step Guides

These guides provide tools to develop and implement a watershed outreach plan and engage with stakeholder groups.

<https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/getnstepguide.pdf> and <https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/stakeholderguide.pdf>

Only Tap Water Delivers Campaign

This resource is a public outreach campaign that is available to AWWA utility members free of charge. The materials are available in a CD toolkit, and can be adapted to meet local needs.

<http://www.awwa.org/resources-tools/public-affairs/communications-tools/only-tap-water-delivers.aspx>

Public Communications Toolkit

This website contains an online toolkit of various resources for water professionals related to public communication.

<http://www.awwa.org/resources-tools/public-affairs/communications-tools/public-communications-toolkit.aspx>

Quality On Tap! Public Relations Campaign

This resource is a public relations and awareness campaign designed especially for the drinking water industry. It is a practical “hands-on” guide to better public relations for small water utilities. It contains the tools small water systems need to spread the word to the public about the work they do and the quality water they produce.

<https://nrwa.org/initiatives/quality-on-tap/>

Value of Water Campaign

The Value of Water Campaign educates and inspires the nation about how water is essential and in need of investment.

<http://uswateralliance.org/initiatives/value-of-water>

