

# The Art and Practice of Communication



Let's Talk About Drought

## A Little About Cobb County Water System

- ❖ We are at the top of the ACFS
- ❖ We are a large metro utility north of Atlanta (one of the Big 5 Metro Counties making up a significant portion of the metro Atlanta Population.)
- ❖ We provide: Water, Wastewater and Stormwater services to about 750,000 citizens
- ❖ We purchase 100% of our water from Cobb County-Marietta Water Authority
- ❖ We represent over 65% of their water sales. (Probably more now that Paulding no longer purchases from CCMWA)
- ❖ About 40% of supply comes from Allatoona and 60% from the Chattahoochee

## Drought: Have a Plan

- ❖ Drought Management Starts with a plan
- ❖ There are different kinds and severity of droughts that determine the plan and actions needed.
- ❖ Each area of the basin has unique challenges and unique pulls on demand that inform the plan
- ❖ Stakeholders are both affected users and partners in successful deployment.

Talk about the Plan

YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST PLAN IN THE WORLD, IF NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT IT, THE PLAN WILL BE COMPLETELY INEFFECTIVE



# A Tale of Two Droughts: One Utility's Story

- ❖ Drought is cyclical it is unavoidable in this region and impacts and severity will always vary.
- ❖ While I was at Cobb Water there were 4 drought cycles
  - 1998-2003 - At the time considered the drought of record
  - 2006-2009 - Hold My Beer
  - 2010-2012
  - 2016-2017
- ❖ We had very different approaches and communication styles and strategies for the 2006 and 2016 droughts.

## 2006-2009

- ❖ Cobb County-Marietta Water Authority watching Allatoona Lake drop precipitously (which was 40% of their water supply) Declared a Level 4 Drought Response (At the time that was a total ban on Outdoor Water Use)
- ❖ That then became their wholesale customer's responsibility to implement on the ground.
- ❖ At the time we were also seeing some of the highest seasonal peak water use we had ever seen. We had to drop peak demand.
- ❖ Our response plan and messaging started with a distinctly Emergency Response Approach.
- ❖ It morphed over the duration to remain emergency focused but to add educational and incentive based messages to help our population achieve what we needed to happen

# Immediate Communication Actions

- ❖ Press Release - About The total Water Ban
- ❖ Updated all website info on [Cobbwater.gov](http://Cobbwater.gov) and [Cobbcounty.gov](http://Cobbcounty.gov)
- ❖ We met with the political leadership went over our first iteration of our emergency drought plan
- ❖ We were fortunate to get a lot of support from County Leadership.
- ❖ We leveraged that and appeared at all of their town halls and at the Commission meetings.
- ❖ In 2007 - things were different so we did leverage local media quite a bit it is harder now.
- ❖ Initial messaging really focused on the emergent nature of the situation and the stick for failing to do what we asked.
- ❖ Fortunately Cobb Water already had a very strong drought restriction enforcement protocol. That was kind of first on the ground focus.

## Transitioning to More Sustainable Messaging

- ❖ The drought went on The state declared a level 4 then went next level and cut all of the affected utilities' permits by 10%.
- ❖ Three specific things we did related to messaging
  - Indoor Water Audit Coupled with incentives (retrofit kits and Toilet Rebate)
  - Outdoor Water Audit and Give Them an Inch Grow a Yard Irrigation Education Campaign
  - Messaging Study with Georgia State.

# Indoor Audit - Incentives

- ❖ We created two Media Pieces an Indoor Water Audit for Residents was one of them.
- ❖ If they completed the audit - They could receive free high efficiency fixtures and if their house was built before 1992 they could purchase and install up to three toilets and receive a rebate as a credit on the water bill.
- ❖ We really relied on partners and stakeholders to help with this.
  - Home Depot Carried the Audit and also the Toilet Rebate Applications
  - UGA Extension also carried the Audits
  - Each of the Commissioners had the Audits for all of their events as well as Retrofit kits ready to go.
  - We also partnered with the Atlanta Apartment Association and local HOAs and Condo Boards.
- ❖ This program was wildly successful we had to increase the budget for kits and rebates three times then the Board told us not to cap it at all.

# Give Them An Inch...Grow a Yard

- ❖ This was the other deliverable a At home Irrigation Audit (this was created in partnership with Irrigation Association and the Georgia Green Industry Association)
- ❖ The whole program components
  - The Irrigation audit
  - Outdoor kits (Hose Nozzle, Rain Gauge and Soil Moisture Gauge)
  - The Thirty Day Landscape Exemption Form and certificate
  - A professional labeling for Landscapers who distributed our materials to educate their customers
  - An HOA program with signage for communities that had us out to educate and give out the materials to their homeowners
  - One of our largest partners was Pike's Nursery who carried all of our materials.

# Messaging Test With GA State

- ❖ A professor at Georgia State, Paul Ferraro, Reached out to me because we were very out front with messaging and programs during the drought.
- ❖ He wanted to test the impact on use from three separate messages
  - Conserve Water: It will save you money
  - Conserve Water: It is the right thing to do for the environment and future generations
  - Conserve Water: Your neighbor does and they are better at it then you. (Essentially a comparison of their water use to other similar users)
- ❖ We were definitely not prepared for the response from our customers who received the comparison message. In fact we had to send calls to the professor because we could not handle the volume.
- ❖ Without a doubt there was a statistically significant reduction in water use for those who received the comparison message. That remained in the follow up consumption reviews we did for the next three years.
- ❖ Side note this study was so interesting that WaterSmart based their business model off of these published findings

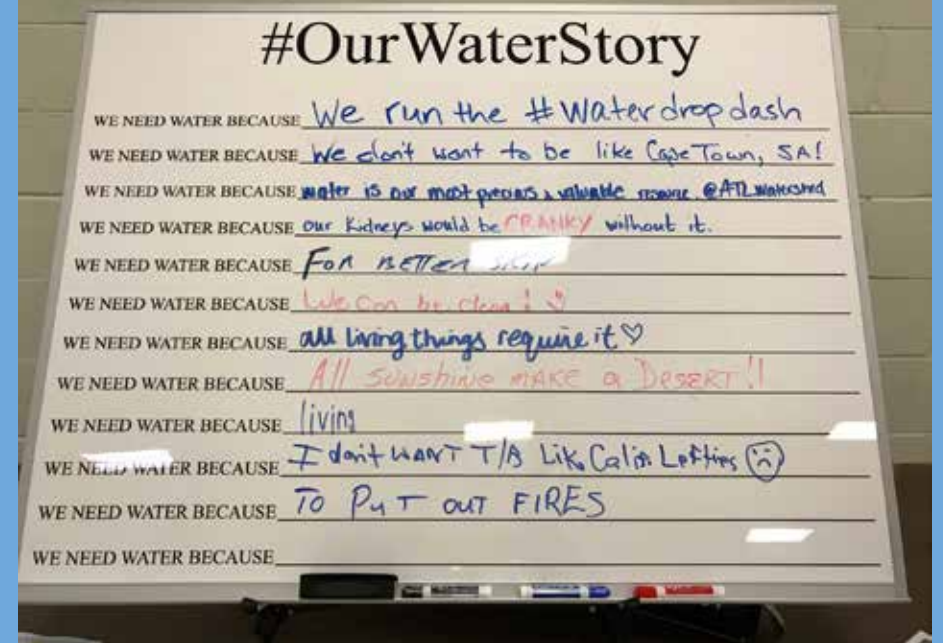
## How Did it All Turn Out

- ❖ All of that work, along with many other things we did, and host of partners worked!
- ❖ We did not run out of water
- ❖ We successfully reduced peak water use and overall per capita use
- ❖ Further we raised awareness of the need for water efficiency
- ❖ We increased people's awareness about the fragility of our water resources
- ❖ The side effect that we saw, play out in future droughts was that our customers' ongoing awareness and efficiency provided additional resource resiliency.



## Drought Messaging Can Be Fun

- ❖ When you are not running out of water...If you are an efficiency geek like me. Drought messaging can be fun. Especially as everything gets noisier you need to think outside the box
- ❖ The 2016-2017 drought. It was not as severe, but also our water use with ongoing efforts had continued to reduce. Our Seasonal peaks were not as high. It let us do some less extreme and emergent messaging.
- ❖ We tried some more fun approaches.
- ❖ We were trying to grab attention more with humor and story



# The 2016 Drought

- ❖ Media landscape had changed
- ❖ We were in a Level 1 declared Drought
- ❖ We wanted to brand our drought messaging this time
- ❖ The all female Ghostbusters was released in 2016.
- ❖ We decided we would brand all messaging for Drought by becoming the all female Drought Busters
- ❖ We did tip videos as the Drought Busters we had shirts made
- ❖ We had our Little Water Efficiency Mascot Tappy Turtle dressed as a Drought Buster
- ❖ We wanted to focus a little more on the carrot and the comedy less on doom and enforcement.



# Last Thoughts and Takeaways

- ❖ Drought messaging has to meet the moment and focus on the appropriate audience
- ❖ No drought plan means anything if no one knows about it.
- ❖ No one person in the utility is an expert on all uses of water we depend on stakeholders to improve our accuracy, capture specific concerns to your user groups, to craft effective messages and programs.
- ❖ Stakeholders have a unique platform to reach beyond what a utility alone can achieve.
- ❖ Throughout the rest of the day you will hear far more detail about resources and specific steps.
- ❖ This is just one story and approach to help you visualize what might be possible and for those who are stakeholders how can you engage and assist with getting these messages out.

Questions?

Thank You

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## Drought Communications Workshop

### Messaging Exercise

*Work with your group to develop a messaging approach. Use multiple handouts – at least one for each person in your group.*

- 1) Where are you located? (Which community? Which part of ACF basin?)
  
- 2) What type of organization will be communicating this message?
  
- 3) What is the goal of this drought message? (e.g., demand reduction, reduce peak use, encourage agricultural conservation, etc.)
  
- 4) Who is your audience? What type of users are you targeting with this message?
  
- 5) What is a message (or more than one) that will resonate with the target audience and support attaining your goal?