

## BEST COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN THE WATER SUPPLY SECTOR

Cristina Borca

Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania  
cristina\_borca1@yahoo.com

Ioana Sarca

Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania  
sarca\_ioana@yahoo.com

Ana-Andreea Mihartescu

University Politehnica Timisoara, Romania  
andreea.mihartescu@upt.ro

Patricia Bogdan

University Politehnica Timisoara, Romania  
patriciabogdan2006@yahoo.com

### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of "water communication" about what external communication means for Water and Sanitation Supply Sector, which are the main topics often transmitted. Effective communication requires developing clear messages, speeches, slogans addressed to a target audience. Better communication between operator and all stakeholders, a better flexibility may lead to finding the necessary financial resources to adapt to climate changes, to demographic expansion, environmental protection etc. Effective communication models and practices must be based on understanding the factors that lead to reactions or attitude of stakeholders by applying feedback methodologies like public consultation, surveys, analysis of complaints etc. This will include analyzing data regarding formation or evolution of habits or attitudes. Also, this paper presents the results of three surveys carried out over a period of time applied by a water operator situated in the western part of Romania, showing the trend of consumption habits of drinking tap water, following the implementation of communication strategies.

*Keywords: communication, water, consumption, surveys, habits.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Romania, this important sector provides water, sewage services, wastewater treatment for domestic and industrial customers. Nowadays, globally agreed, water utilities are faced with challenges in their activities because they have to maintain, to repair or to extend the water infrastructure, in order to provide clean water to customers, wastewater collection and treatment but also, storm water management. These problems are exacerbated by the pressure of population growth, climate change, unpredictable energy costs etc. As these concerns converge, it became clearer for Romanian water operators be able to fulfill the needs of the present, but also fulfill the development of the future forecasts. Currently, in Romania there are 42 water operators with monopoly on regional operating area. Therefore existing communication campaigns are not used essentially for advertising purposes but rather for information or awareness purposes.

This paper is an overview of the main communication topics in water sector and especially an overview of communication channels used by a regional water operator. As case study for this work, it was chosen the regional water operator situated in Timis County. According to the operator's website, [aquatim.ro](http://aquatim.ro), the main information and public awareness campaigns reflect specific themes like: drinking water quality, services tariffs, measuring water consumption, projects, investments, water usage, national and European legislation, standards, water protection etc.

When we are talking about communication, we are talking about communication channels, exchange of messages, senders, receivers, target audience, feedback, social interactions and interfaces. In last years, the water operator mentioned above has conducted two surveys financed from European funds regarding matters of communication, image and customer satisfaction. Regarding this study, until results comparison point, two surveys had been extracted – exhibiting only the preferred public communication channels.

## **2. COMMUNICATION – DEFINITIONS**

The term “communication” has been defined in many ways for many purposes. From the variety of definitions it has been selected few that are relevant for this work. Communication is an essential element for the optimal functioning of any human collectivity, from a group to the entire organization, regardless of its size and nature. According to Niculae, Gherghita, Gherghita (2006), communication always seeks to achieve a specific purpose and to maintain a positive reputation.

When organizations grow and become more complex, organizational communication must be aligned to the needs of increased quality (Ince, M. & Gül, H., 2011). Communication processes in an organization consist in exchange the information across an interrelated network and the transmission of news tough and by employees. According to (Altinoz, M., 2008), organizational communication means the structural communication of all employees with their internal and external environments.

### **2.1. Communication in the Public Water Sector**

In 2014, Herve-Bazin defined the “public communication” term as being related to all communications with a public service mission. One year later, same author stated that water utilities have a strong potential for environmental, awareness key messages transmitted to the costumers such as beneficiaries or non-state actors. They usually join together to manage the water resources more efficiently (Hervé-Bazin, 2015). In defining an adequate communication strategy to the specific of a geographical area or even a hydrographical basin, all stakeholders have to be involved, such as: the local and regional authorities, the water suppliers, the industry, the commerce, the agriculture, the environment initiative groups, the educational units, the NGOs and, the most important, the target population, consisting in real and potential consumers. Communication is a vital tool for utility managers, policy-makers involved in water management but also for students in social sciences or environment.

## **3. DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CASE STUDY**

The company described in this paper is Aquatim - the water, sewerage and wastewater treatment provider in Timis County, one of the 42 regional suppliers of such utilities from Romania. In 2014, according to the annual report, at drinking water section, it is stated that the company operates 249 drillings, 19 treatment plants and a supply network of over 1,600 km. There are over 60,000 household connections, out of which 98% are metered. The population from the area of operation is around of 460,000 inhabitants, out of which 87% use centralized water supply services.

In Timișoara almost 100% of the population have centralized water supply, while in the remaining area of supply, the percentage is of only 60%. The inhabitants of Timișoara get two thirds of their tap water from the Bega River and one third from deep and medium-depth drills. Throughout the county, the water supply is mainly ensured from ground sources. The treatment plants use various technologies, as required by the quality of the sources. According to the same source, at Wastewater collection and treatment section, the company operates around 830 km of waste water collection pipes, 7 waste water treatment plants and 66 waste water pumping stations. From a 460,000 inhabitants (population in the area of supply), only 74% use the sewerage services. In Timișoara the service coverage rate is nearly 100%, while in the remaining area of supply the rate is only of 16%.

According to the company's annual report available on its website, at the end of 2014, the area of supply covered one hundred localities in the Timis County, including the city of Timișoara, eight towns and 38 communes. In 2014, new administrative bodies of the nine communes from Timis County delegated to Aquatim, on a contract basis, the responsibility for the provision of their water and waste water services. Aquatim is a licensed operator for the water and sewerage services in the Timiș County, as certified by the National Regulating Authority for Public Utility Community. In 2014, the national regulator extended Aquatim's licence for the provision of water and wastewater public utility services in accordance with the larger area of supply.

### 3.1. Research results and conclusions

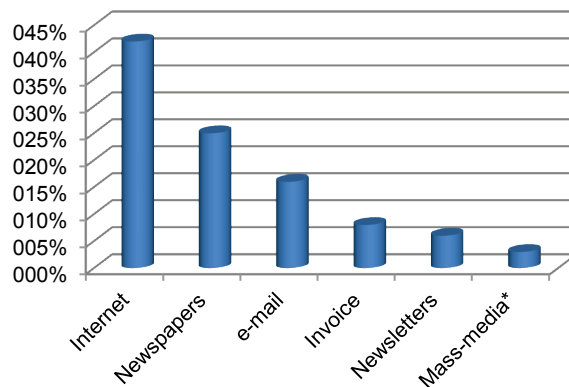
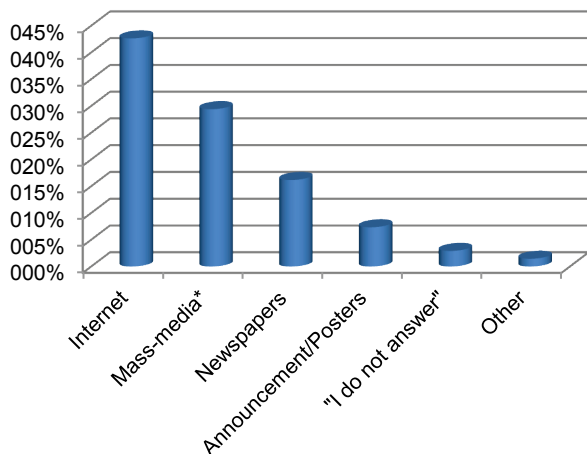
In order to identify which is the preferred communication channel by the customers, the water operator conducted two surveys, in 2013 and in 2015, based on questionnaires distributed face-to-face and on-line. These two surveys are available on Aquatim's website. The results are plotted in picture 1. The study aimed to collect data from the following target groups: customers living at home (in picture 1 they are called "household customers"); administrators of associations of owners/tenants as representatives of customers who live in apartment buildings; industrial customers as "potential polluters" from a list of companies monitored by the water operator and mass-media representatives.

At the question "In what ways would you like to be informed about future investments of Aquatim?", the answers are different from a stakeholder to another as follows: in both years, 2012 and 2015, more than 40% of industrial customers want to be informed via internet, while almost 30% of householders prefer mass-media<sup>1</sup>. But the rest of the channels vary from a year to another. In the case of industrial customers the second place in 2012 are occupied by newspapers and in 2015 by mass-media. In the case of householders, the second place isn't identified, the majority answer with "I do not answer" or "other".

**Picture 1:** The results of questionnaires conducted by water operator regarding preferred communication channels

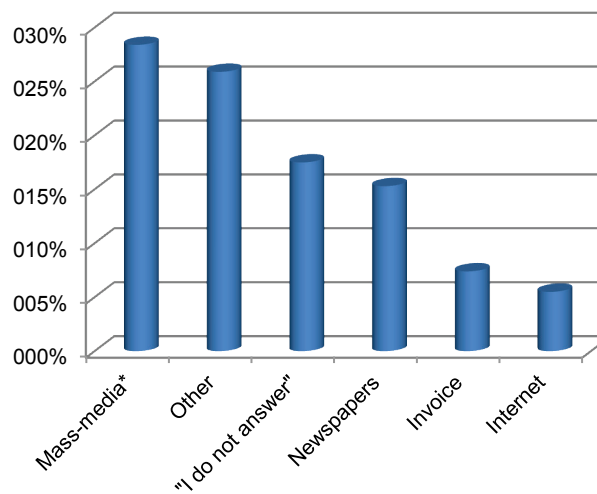
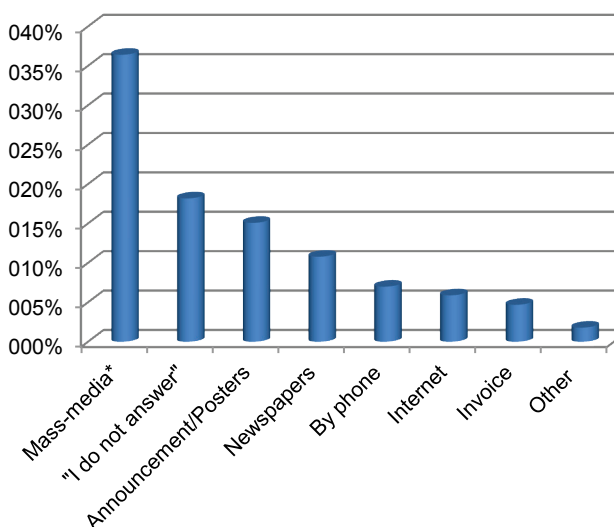


<sup>1</sup> According to the methodology described on Aquatim's website, the term mass media was used in surveys in order to define radio and TV communication.



2015  
 "In what ways would you like to be informed about future investments of Aquatim?"  
 (household customers)

2012  
 "In what ways would you like to be informed about future investments of Aquatim?"  
 (household customers)

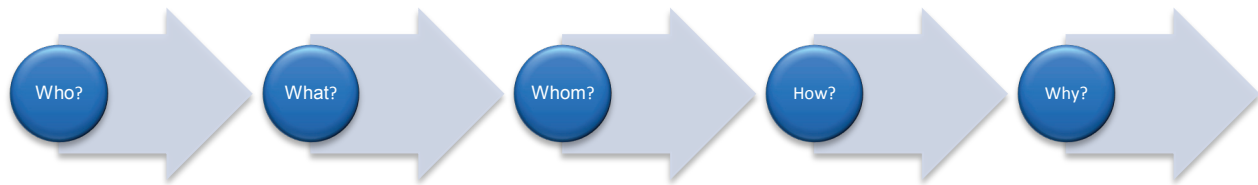


Source: [www.aquatim.ro](http://www.aquatim.ro)

### 3.2. A conceptual model of communication in the public water sector

In 1948, Harold Dwight Lasswell developed a mass communication model (Laswell, 1948) in "The structure and Function of Communication in Society". The model summarized the famous questions: Who says? What to? Whom in? What channel with? What effect? Simplifying, it can be said that a communication frame should answer to the five questions as the follow diagram shows (picture 2):

Picture 2: A simple scheme of the communication process



Source: Laswell, 1948

Based on this model, the results of the review and classification of messages on the Aquatim’s website it can be design a conceptual model, a general scheme of the communication process in the water sector.

**Table 1:** A general scheme of the communication process in the water sector

<p><b>WHO?</b> <i>The regional water supplier:</i></p> <p>The communication department ‘employees, managers, „ambassadors” employees.</p> <p><i>The main factors that could interfere in communication process:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the size of the company;</li> <li>- its reputation;</li> <li>- its experience in the field of Public Relations and in the field of Customer Service;</li> <li>- marketing strategies;</li> <li>- performance indicators.</li> </ul>	<p><b>TO WHOM? (Stakeholders):</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Characterization of the stakeholders: householders, industrial customers, institutions, administrative bodies, NGO’s etc.</li> <li>2. Elaboration of the Communication Plan personalized for each stakeholder categories.</li> </ol>	<p><b>WHY? or WHAT EFFECT?</b> <i>Expected results:</i></p> <p><i>Regarding costumers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase the water connections’ number;</li> <li>- trust;</li> <li>- raising awareness.</li> </ul> <p><i>Regarding employees:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- commitment, loyalty;</li> <li>- increase of the productivity;</li> <li>- civic behavior;</li> <li>- „Ambassadors”employees;</li> <li>- motivation.</li> </ul> <p><i>Regarding other stakeholders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loyalty;</li> <li>- Support;</li> </ul> <p><i>In general:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- visibility;</li> <li>- credibility;</li> <li>- fundraising;</li> <li>- brand construction.</li> </ul>
<p><b>WHAT?</b> <i>Communication campaigns’ aim:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the informative one;</li> <li>2. the raising awareness one.</li> </ol> <p><i>The message’s content:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the initiative, the intentions;</li> <li>2. expected impact.</li> </ol>	<p><b>HOW? (What channels?)</b> <i>Controllable:</i></p> <p><i>On-line</i> – website, social media, blogs, newspapers, newsletters, letters addressed to clients, publicity;</p> <p><i>Off-line</i> – print, Events/PR, mass-media; “face-to-face”.</p> <p><i>Independent (un-controlable):</i> Mass-media; “Word of mouth”.</p>	<p>Feedback/ Evaluation indicators</p>

Source: Table based on the research conclusions

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, it can be concluded that it is very important to adapt communication channels depending on the preferences of the audience and depending of the nature of the message. Furthermore, both channels preferred by the stakeholder categories mentioned in paper are relevant in the communication process. Their usage may be varied by the decision of communicators, by the budget allocated to, by the size of the target group etc. Internet can be handy and cheaper for carrying any organized information campaigns. But the media, especially TV and radio seems, according to surveys results, to play an important role in communication. A local television station, being a member in community, can be a partner in campaigns. The organization, especially public institution should re-

formulate and improve the communication strategy more frequently and take into consideration the target preferences.

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