**Annual Communications Plan Template**

**for a Public Power Utility**

**BACKGROUND**

Customer research conducted by the American Public Power Association showed that only 1 in 5 customers of a public power utility knows that their utility is not-for-profit and owned by the community. This emphasizes the need for us to communicate better with our customers and tell them about the unique benefits we offer. We can no longer afford to communicate just about bilks, problems, and outages — it is important to connect with customers continuously and to educate them on important issues.

**OBJECTIVES**

**What do we want to accomplish?**

* To help customers and stakeholders appreciate the benefits we offer as their community-owned utility.
* To show that we care about and give back to our community.
* To build goodwill and trust among customers — so they will be supportive in difficult situations such as prolonged outages, rate increases, takeover threats, etc.
* To educate customers about responsible electricity use.
* To encourage customers to talk to us about options before accepting third party offers related to electricity use.

Note: It is always best to align our communications objectives to our overall utility business goals or strategic plan. For example, if our business goal is to “Increase enrollment in energy savings program by 10% in 6 months,” then our communications goal could be to “Increase social media traffic to program sign up form on website by 30%.” If our business goal is to “Attract locals to apply for utility jobs” then our communications goal could be to “Provide career information to increase social media engagement among millennials by 50%.”

**TACTICS**

**What channels should we develop?**

**Social media:** At a minimum, we need to have an active presence on Facebook and Twitter. We should also join [Nextdoor](https://nextdoor.com/) or other neighborhood social networks or email groups. If possible, it would be good to have an Instagram account as well.

**Website:** Let’s build a simple website (1-5 pages) that describes our utility and provides important customer service information. If we’re not able to have an independent website for our electric utility/department, let’s talk to the city about providing a full page on their website for us.

Either way, let’s construct our site/page to provide basic information that does not need frequent updates and point to our social media channels for news and updates. Let’s link to the American Public Power Association [website](https://www.publicpower.org/public-power) for the history and benefits of public power.

**Local press:** Let us establish relationships with reporters from our local newspaper, radio, and TV stations. We could have coffee with each of them and discuss what type of stories they are looking for and how our utility can be helpful. We should keep their contact information handy and reach out as soon as news breaks.

**Email:** Let us askresidential customersto provide their email address if that is how they’d prefer to get utility news and updates. We should use email sparingly — to communicate special offers/programs, meeting/event announcements, rate changes, technology and system upgrades, adverse weather/disaster preparation, and outage restoration.

A subscription to a basic email service like [Constant Contact](https://www.constantcontact.com/index.jsp?utm_id=GOO910401D&cc=GOO910401D&pn=search&gclid=Cj0KCQiAv_HSBRCkARIsAGaSsrBubpctt7YoPEFl1oz03DzHprffTBsFMhoiIcxgkRQ_1wxMpuiEZH4aAq-QEALw_wcB&ef_id=WhM6kAAAAKZPiCCY:20180115161649:s) or [MailChimp](https://mailchimp.com/mailchimp-vs-other-products/?awid=999168463&awag=46942622582&awad=235855950157&awkw=constant%20contact&pid=GAW&source=website&ds_rl=1253088&gclid=Cj0KCQiAv_HSBRCkARIsAGaSsrDF9cnxYReI6NJMz1nYZXIYqKX7OILakyjFslDqGLO8Exjd-V-SDek) will help us manage our emails.

One-on-one, personalized emails would be best for our commercial and industrial customers.

**Bill stuffers:** If we are mailing bills,we couldplan on including one bill stuffer every month to highlight public power benefits, electricity use stats and facts, energy efficiency and safety tips, solar and home battery FAQs, rate information, or cybersecurity and data protection tips, etc. The American Public Power Association website offers several [templates and resources](https://www.publicpower.org/communication-templates).

**Interpersonal connections:** Nothing can replace the power of face-to-face communications and interactions with our customers. We need to be out in the community as much as possible. Let us identify community events we can participate in and invite customers to visit us and to attend public meetings where important utility decisions are made. We can also offer experts to speak on topics like energy efficiency, electrical safety, and other issues at local school and community events.

Our staff and board/council members can be our best ambassadors — we should prepare them with the right messages to share in the community.

**RESOURCES & ASSIGNMENTS**

**Who will do it?**

**Freelancers:** If we cannot afford to have a full-time communications person on staff, let us get some outside help. A freelancer who can devote 6–8 hours a week should be able to help us with the basics — nurturing an active social media presence and creating or repurposing materials for other channels. Local college students or mom/dad bloggers may be a good option.

Some American Public Power Association associate members offer freelance marketing and communication services for utilities and are listed on the Association’s [suppliers guide](http://www.appasuppliersguide.org/SearchResult.asp?cid=1).

A few other good sources to find professional help — writing, design, photography, videography — at reasonable cost are [Thumbtack](https://www.thumbtack.com/), [Fiverr](https://www.fiverr.com/), [Upwork](https://www.upwork.com/ppc/landing/?ct=Pros&gclid=Cj0KCQiAv_HSBRCkARIsAGaSsrAZXa1HLxYgJs7nvp3M9ONgY-0EcQC6k_vgW5mqqz08a-p0TdILOA8aAu1AEALw_wcB&hl=Top%20Rated%20Social%20Freelancers&query=Social), and [99Designs](https://99designs.com/).

**Ambassadors:** Our best spokespersons are our own utility staff and especially our city council/ board members. Let us focus on equipping them with key messages and tips on how to talk about our utility in the community.

**City communications staff:** Let’s make sure to connect with the city public information/public affairsstaff and set up a regular schedule to send them utility-related information they can share through the city channels — social media, website, newsletters, etc. Let’s return the favor and ask if they have messages from the city we can help amplify and share with our followers.

**Association help:** We are members of the American Public Power Association, which offers many no-cost and low-cost resources as part of our membership. They have communication [templates and resources](https://www.publicpower.org/communication-templates). They also provide basic information about [public power](https://www.publicpower.org/public-power) that we can link to.

We can learn from the experts by attending [webinars](https://www.publicpower.org/event/group/webinars) and the annual [Customer Connections Conference](https://www.publicpower.org/event/customer-connections-conference) at discounted rates.

We can get hands-on communication strategies and ideas from other utilities like ours through conversations on the Public Communications listserv (join [here](https://www.publicpower.org/about/members/listservs)).

**How to set the communications budget:** Our budget will depend on how much we decide to do. The most significant cost will be for outside help we hire.

It would also be good to budget a modest amount ($1,000 – $2,500) annually to boost/promote select social media posts highlighting special utility events or offers where we want reach as many of our customers.

If we plan to host community events, we’d want to budget separately for each of those.

**ACTIONS**

**How will we carry out our plan?**

**Regular outreach:** At a minimum, in uneventful times (when there are no disasters, outages, rate changes, special events), we should

* Post once a day on Facebook and Twitter (if every day is not feasible, we must aim to post 2-3 times a week at least).
* Monitor and respond to comments on Facebook and Twitter daily.
* Check the website once a month to see if any updates are required.
* Connect with our local press contacts once a quarter with story ideas — including photos and videos, reliability performance reports, utility accomplishments and plans — or just to check in.

What can we post about on social media? Here are some ideas

* Share pictures/videos (captured on our smartphones) of lineworkers at work in our community.
* Offer energy efficiency tips and ideas for savings.
* Share and retweet relevant posts from the American Public Power Association on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/americanpublicpower/) and [Twitter](https://twitter.com/publicpowerorg?lang=en).
* Sign up for the Association’s free monthly social media email (email [News@PublicPower.org](mailto:News@PublicPower.org) to subscribe) with tips and curated content that we can post on our channels.

**Special circumstances:** If we have technology/system upgrades, rate changes, leadership changes, special program and offers, customer service information etc. these will merit multiple and repetitive communications on all channels.

We also need to have a separate crisis communications plan in place to address natural events and prolonged outages. The American Public Power Association’s [Storm Communications Guide for members](https://www.publicpower.org/system/files/documents/22_public_power_storm_communications_guide_cover.pdf) (requires a member login to access) offers tips to communicate effectively with all stakeholders before, during, and after a disaster and includes template press releases, sample social media posts, and checklists.

**Ambassador engagement:** We should plan onboarding and refresher sessions for our city council/board members at least twice a year. This [Public Power 101 slide deck](https://www.dropbox.com/s/twx2z5k6qi6ydxb/Public%20Power%20101%20Slides%20Widescreen.pptx?dl=0) is a good resource to educate them on public power basics.

For staff, let’s do a quarterly lunch or breakfast where we can have the CEO/general manager provide updates and encourage them to carry key messages to the community.

We should look for opportunities to highlight the champions in local press and social media. We must ask all our staff and board/council members to follow us on social media and to like and share our posts regularly.

**Community events:** Let us try to plan for at least two events a year where we can invite the community to join us. Here are some [event ideas](https://www.publicpower.org/periodical/article/investing-main-street-community-engagement-public-power-style) from other public power utilities.

We could plan to host one event during [Public Power Week](https://www.publicpower.org/event/public-power-week) (the first full week in October every year) — we can consider utility/substation tours, bucket truck rides, breakfast or lunch for the community, etc.

The second event could be a one in which we volunteer for a community project. Here are some ways in which other public power utilities [give back to the community](https://www.publicpower.org/blog/powering-strong-communities-giving-back).

**Key messages:** We need to keep all our communications simple and appealing and include a call to action wherever possible. We should develop and weave in key messages in all our communications. Core public power key messages are

* You (customers) own this utility and your local government runs it for you.
* We are not-for-profit and answerable to our customer-owners, not to remote shareholders.
* We are all about community — we employ local residents, support local businesses, and give back to the community in many ways.
* Our focus is to keep electricity affordable, reliable, safe, and environmentally responsible.

Yes, we are a “muni.” But referring to ourselves as a community-owned utility is a better way to nurture a sense of ownership and engage customers.

The American Public Power Association uses the tagline “Powering Strong Communities” to describe us, their members. We can use or adapt this tagline as we see fit.

This boilerplate that the Association uses to explain who we are is a good reference:   
*Community-owned, not-for-profit public power utilities power homes and businesses in 2,000 communities — from small towns to large cities. They safely provide reliable, low-cost electricity to more than 49 million Americans, while protecting the environment. These utilities generate or buy electricity from diverse sources. They employ 93,000 people and earn $58 billion in revenue each year. Public power supports local commerce and jobs and invests back into the community.”*

In all our social media posts, let’s use the hashtag #publicpower to show that we are part of a national community.

**MEASUREMENT**

**How will we know if we’re successful and where we can improve?**

**Customer survey:** If we already do a periodic customer service survey, let’s include questions that relate to our objectives. For example, we ask if respondents are aware that we are a public power utility and what that means.

Some questions that the American Public Power Association asked customers in a national survey:

*In your own words, please tell me what you believe to be your local utility´s primary motivation when conducting business?*

*Based on all you know or may have heard, who do you believe owns your electric utility?*

*A public power or municipal utility is one that is run by local or state government on behalf of citizen owners. For each of these statements that describe a public power utility’s ownership* *model, tell me how aware you were of that characteristic.*

* Public power utilities are operated by local governments
* Public power utilities are directly accountable to the people they serve through local elected or appointed officials
* Two-thirds of public power systems do not generate their own electricity, but buy it on the wholesale market for distribution to customers
* About 2,000 towns in America have public power utilities

*What do you believe are some of the benefits of a public power utility?*

* Lower electricity rates
* Reliable service
* Responsiveness to customer concerns
* Making the best decisions for the community’s welfare
* Local employment/economic development
* Not-for-profit status
* Greater portion of revenues stay in community
* Environmentally responsible
* Nothing/unsure
* Using renewable energy sources
* All of the above
* Other
* More accountable for performance

*How important is it to you that your local utility have a strong community presence (e.g., involved in charitable activities, participate in community-wide activities, etc.)?*

**Social media metrics:** Social media provides easy to access metrics that serve as a good indicator of how interested people are in our messages and how much they engage with us. Let’s focus on engagement statistics rather than vanity metrics.

For example, if we look at Facebook insights, the Post Engagements (how often people like, comment on, or share our posts) is the most important metric — we can track this to see which posts were most popular as well as engagement over specific time periods.

Likewise, on [Twitter analytics](https://analytics.twitter.com) we can view our top tweets, top mentions, top followers and track how each of our tweets are engaging with our audience.