

## Managing Risk and Public Expectations Through Authentic Engagement — Why Strategic Communications Matters

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**Proactive, collaborative and responsive stakeholder and public engagement drives project success by preventing risky and costly development delays or cancellations.**

While the practice of engaging the public and stakeholders in a project's early stages is nothing new, the level of public influence and involvement has never been higher. This trend of increased participation has continued upward as water utilities' budgets decrease and project problems become more complex. The public has also found new, more modern and innovative ways to mobilize and communicate their concerns.

In response, we have grown a Strategic Communications practice that specializes in providing communication expertise across all professional services we deliver. This service originated as a public involvement practice that supported the National Environmental Policy Act process on large and small infrastructure projects. Over time, HDR's Strategic Communications program evolved to encompass broader, more comprehensive communication strategies for a wide range of efforts across many audiences. The public has always cared about issues that directly impact neighborhoods and communities, but global issues, like water quality and supply and demand, have increasingly become top priorities that sway public sentiment.

### EVOLVING COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

Today we experience a more thoughtful and often dramatic shift in not only public awareness but public activism as well.

The drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, water scarcity in the southwestern United States and flooding in the Midwest are just a few of the national crises that have sparked considerable reactions.

The public demands more information about complex, technical water projects. Today's backyard is the entire globe, and the public expects transparency, clarity and a voice in what is happening in their communities. The public has naturally evolved into a tech-savvy culture with a greater ability to engage — ultimately raising the stakes with higher expectations for involvement in projects that pique their interest, regardless of geography.

This shift changes the nature of public infrastructure projects, and the demand for information adds challenges to the natural complexity of water projects. Significant funding needs and additional multijurisdictional partnerships require increasing levels of collaboration, often crossing geographic and cultural boundaries as well as multiple election cycles.

Technological changes and trends will continue to evolve, and stakeholders will employ these new methods to rally and gain momentum. These dramatic changes have created an environment where social and political influence is swift and

powerful; it can dramatically impact the success or failure of a project and even entire industries.

Our Strategic Communications practitioners specialize in grassroots education and outreach through existing social and stakeholder groups in communities. Our team leverages traditional and virtual tools such as web, video and social networking to maximize communication reach and impact. Our wide-scale media strategy includes targeted digital, print, television and radio campaigns. Together, we help build and implement a communications plan that will meet the needs of projects and have a meaningful impact in communities.

### **THINK BEYOND THE PUBLIC MEETING**

Gone are the days of doing only what is required by the regulatory process. Proactive, collaborative and responsive stakeholder and public outreach drives project success by preventing risky and costly development delays or cancellations. We encourage and support taking a more holistic and continuous approach to engagement. We've found that this approach leads to stronger community relationships and consistent project understanding, acceptance and support among affected communities.

A well-planned and executed communication strategy benefits the project, its owner and all interested stakeholders by establishing and reflecting stakeholder expectations. This type of engagement is planned, provides education, engages the stakeholders and is meaningfully managed throughout the project. Our role on projects is often to build community support by sharing information, gathering stakeholder input and managing project risk through careful planning and implementation of communication strategies. The failure to recognize the need for a meaningful strategic communications plan, led by trained communications professionals, is often a common pitfall for those who may not fully appreciate

the risk their projects may face. Failure to consult and employ a strong communications plan often proves costly in the face of public controversy, resulting in delayed and even prematurely ended projects.

### **COMMUNICATION RISK EARLY ASSESSMENT**

Our team works to understand what motivates public resistance and uses the most appropriate and proven best practices for engagement throughout the project. Our support begins by predicting potential impacts and opposition during the earliest stages of a project. Once a formal project is proposed, development teams begin planning broader outreach efforts to reach communities and stakeholders. Finally, with development underway, we act on implementing specific engagement measures during design, planning, engineering and construction. We help enhance community acceptance, build trust and protect client and project reputations.

Ultimately, a well-executed communication plan creates transparency, minimizes controversy and saves time and money. The most effective programs create community and stakeholder acceptance by leading with proactive strategy and authentic and creative engagement.

Every project is different, and every communication strategy requires a customized approach with a unique mix of tools and tactics that best serves the needs of the project and stakeholders.

### **VIRTUAL SPHERE**

Now more than ever, infrastructure projects are being challenged by shifting communication needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need to plan ahead and flex to stave off social and political risk. Our Strategic Communications team inherently works in a risk-management and crisis-response mentality and, at the start of this pandemic, we reacted on day one. Immediately, we helped clients shift from in-person engagement to physically distanced and virtual strategies. This allowed projects to keep moving and provided clients more time to focus on community health and safety. With the right tools, business can keep moving with authentic engagement, even in the virtual sphere.



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