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Louisville Water: Nationally on Tap for Marketing and Communications

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Kelley Dearing Smith is vice president of communications and marketing at Louisville Water. With a 20-plus-year career there, she continues to connect the brand to the community and directs the media, marketing, education, government relations and economic development activities as part of her role as a national go-to in the water industry for her expertise. Louisville Water is the first and only utility to date that has trademarked tap water — Louisville pure tap®.

She is also chair-elect of the American Water Works Association Public Affairs Council and will officially take the reins as chair in June 2021.

HDR caught up with Louisville Water to ponder on strategic communications best practice and reflections during the current 2020 climate.

HDR: YOU'RE RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE BEST COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN THE WATER INDUSTRY.... WHAT'S BEEN THE SECRET TO YOUR SUCCESS?

KDS: Wow, thanks for saying that — really means a lot. At my core, I'm a storyteller. I'm curious and creative and I've always been a person who wants to learn more. I started as a journalist before I moved to water, and that foundation has helped me evolve to where I'm at today. I never would have envisioned that I'd spend 20+ years at a drinking water utility. I didn't even know where my drinking water came from when I interviewed! (There was no Google search....) I'm not sure I have a secret but what I often say is that I can "connect the dots."

I listen, observe and then can come away with an idea for a campaign, a media pitch or an employee opportunity. Throughout my career, it's always mattered to me that I put myself in someone else's place. When I worked in television and ended

up in management, I'd make sure to work the overnight shift with a new editor or make sure a producer went out with a videographer to understand what happens in the field. I've continued that at Louisville Water; I spend time in the lab, on a job site, listen to a customer service employee or tag along with my own team regularly. As you move through your career, you can't leave behind your roots. And especially when it's your job to communicate, you must understand the pieces that go into building the story.

HDR: LOUISVILLE WATER MADE AN UNPRECEDENTED DECISION YEARS AGO TO "BRAND" ITS TAP WATER. HOW HAS THAT BENEFITTED YOUR REPUTATION AMONG YOUR CUSTOMERS AND STAKEHOLDERS?

KDS: The decision to trademark Louisville's drinking water as Louisville pure tap® in 1997 was brilliant one, led by the woman who hired me. Louisville Water was the first (and to date the only) utility to trademark its tap water. Trademarking the tap water was truly the first step in really taking a firm stand to talk about the quality and value of something so many take for granted. The name and the messaging that came with it took Louisville Water from being perceived as a utility to a path towards becoming a brand. The pure tap program laid the foundation to build internal and external brand ambassadors, a customer outreach program, a school curriculum, countless community partnerships and a content marketing program.

The reputation now comes as something like a badge of honor: employees are proud to talk about the work they do; college students tweet about how much they miss the taste when they leave home; a distillery tour guide touts the quality on a tour; and, the community embraces drinking tap water over bottled water. The program has also given us a platform to talk about the science and engineering that goes into every glass, to tell the story of what

Louisville Water does and its connection to every home, business, school, restaurant, hospital, attractions, etc. in this city. This builds confidence in the company that leads to acceptance of rate increases and tearing up a road for a new water main. Now, at a time when social media chatter on water quality can be threatening and there's mistrust in systems, Louisville Water has built a team of brand ambassadors that can counter the negativity. I always say it's much better when someone else gives the toast!

HDR: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED EVERY PERSON, IN EVERY INDUSTRY, INCLUDING WATER. YOU'VE WORKED THROUGH BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES RELATED TO THIS CRISIS. WHAT LESSONS DID YOU LEARN?

KDS: There are a few lessons that stand out and in fact, I think about these often. This is the toughest period that I've managed through in my career and I think it's because the work and personal challenges and concerns have collided. In Louisville, it's not only the impact of COVID-19. Our city is hurting from the police shooting of Breonna Taylor. Like so many, I'm balancing a staff that suddenly went



Kelley Dearing Smith, Louisville Water Vice President of Communications and Marketing

remote and handling risk communications that change daily while juggling family life that's been thrown a loop and my own personal mindset and wellbeing. It's so hard to "turn off" these days. The combination of the pandemic and the social unrest is a weight that you can't easily lift off. Coming out of this time in our history, I want to be part of meaningful change. There's no playbook for this crisis but I've learned several things.

First is the value of listening and communicating with your employees. Utility leaders excel at mobilizing to fix a giant water main break or addressing a water quality threat. That's what we're wired to do. But this crisis is different — your people are impacted the most. And that's been tough for many organizations because in our industry, the top leaders are not wired like a communicator. We think differently — and that diversity of thought is critical.

Second, I've learned the value of a personal foundation. Every leader needs their "go-to" group and for me, I am blessed to have friends across the United States and here in Louisville that I can text, email or call and get that advice and a reality check. If you don't have that, get it. And most importantly, don't just reach out in a crisis — relationships are built on authenticity.

Third, I've seen the value of a foundation of a communication plan. It doesn't have to be a big, formal book. In fact, mine looks more like an interlocking of colored circles with the key messages and channels that really matter. Having that foundation for how we communicate in any crisis, positive event or opportunity is guiding me and my team through this.

Finally, I've learned to adapt. I miss people. I miss talking to someone over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. I miss popping into someone's office or driving to the plant or a job site just to be engaged. I've had to pivot and realize that I can keep that personal touch and "virtual" coffee and wine isn't that bad.

HDR: YOUR UTILITY TOOK A VERY PROACTIVE APPROACH TO ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF LEAD

LINES IN YOUR SERVICE AREA. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WAS THE DRIVING MOTIVATION BEHIND YOUR DECISION?

KDS: I think the decision comes from Louisville Water's DNA — we're wired to focus on public health: to innovate, to go above and beyond and to think first not of ourselves but our customers. There is so much debate over the cost of replacement, the responsibility and the equity in fixing this problem. And if we'd waited for that debate to end, we'd never have started the replacement program. The motivation that started the lead program continues in looking at affordability, emerging contaminants and addressing people's perception of tap water.

HDR: WHAT TRENDS DO YOU SEE ON THE HORIZON REGARDING THE WAY WATER AND WASTEWATER UTILITIES ENGAGE THEIR CUSTOMERS AND STAKEHOLDERS?

KDS: All it takes is a pandemic to highlight your holes and your opportunities. I think many utility leaders finally get the message that communications is not just an after-thought or "prettying up" a piece of copy that's too complicated for a typical customer to understand; communications is not telling your customers what you're doing, it's listening and engaging and then strategically delivering the message; and, communications is not putting out a press release or not talking about something that might be controversial. The pandemic, the wake-up call with lead from a few years ago, social media attacks from advocacy groups on water quality and the wave of retirements in our industry have highlighted the value of telling your story and engaging with the community.

I think the trend is that the top leadership is starting to finally get it and understand that strategic communications is an art and profession, just like engineering and water quality. And that bringing the two together can build value for the utility's brand and support from customers and stakeholders. I also see a trend in "how" we engage. Right now, digital dominates and that's not going away. But, there's also value in face-to-face and meeting people where they're comfortable. A plan for effectively engaging with your customers includes many layers and avenues.