Doing a good job in the drinking water utility business can be a thankless task. As long as the water faithfully pours out of your customers’ taps and everybody’s white laundry remains that way, most people will fail to recognize all the planning and hard work that goes into providing a safe, affordable, and reliable supply of drinking water.

Yours is a job that goes on behind the scenes, until a water main breaks or it’s time for a rate increase. Up until that time most people pretty much take their drinking water for granted.

This is why it is important that systems large and small take advantage of every opportunity to communicate with their customers and let people know about all the hard work that goes into keeping their water safe and secure. As you go about putting together your annual Consumer Confidence Report (CCR) over the coming days, why not take advantage of this opportunity to tell your customers a little about what is going on behind the scenes at their local water treatment plant.

The ABC’s of the CCR

The CCR is the centerpiece of the right-to-know provisions of the 1996 Amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act. Under these amendments, all community water systems serving at least 25 year-round customers are directed to create an annual report on the quality of the drinking water they produce.

While a CCR doesn’t have to be fancy, both state and federal guidelines require that they contain key information including:

Water System Information—Provide the name, and address of the water system, and the phone number of the person who can answer customer’s questions about the report. Also provide information about public participation opportunities (times, dates, and locations of board meetings, etc.) and information for non-English speaking customers (if necessary).

The Source of Your Water—List the name and location of water sources used by your system, provide information about where and how to obtain a copy of the most recent source water assessments completed by your system, and include information about significant sources of contamination that could potentially impact your system’s water source.
Definitions—Provide explanations for:
- Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL): The highest level of contaminant that EPA allows in drinking water
- Maximum Contaminant Level Goal (MCLG): The level of contaminant in drinking water below which there is no known or expected health risk
- Maximum Residual Disinfectant Level (MRDL): A level of disinfectant added for water treatment that may not be exceeded at the consumer’s tap without an unacceptable possibility of adverse health effects

And, other definitions as required by your state.

Detected Contaminants—Develop a summary of data on all detected-regulated and unregulated-contaminants; known or likely source of each detected contaminant with an MCL/MRDL; a description of potential health effects related to the contaminant; information on Cryptosporidium, radon, and other contaminants as required by each state; a statement showing compliance with other drinking water regulations; an explanation of any violations, potential health effects, and steps taken to correct the violations; and an explanation of any variances/exemptions that may apply to your water system.

Required Educational Material—Provide an explanation of contaminants and their presence in drinking water, a warning for vulnerable populations about Cryptosporidium, and informational statements on arsenic, nitrate, and lead as required in your state.

The deadline for the annual distribution of the CCR to your customers and your state primacy agency is July 1. Your report should cover from January 1 to December 31 of the previous calendar year.

It’s important to remember that this is not a comprehensive list of information required in your system’s CCR. Be sure to check with your state primacy agency to learn what specific information is required in your neck of the woods.

Build Confidence with Your CCR

The CCR is one of the simplest and most effective tools that you have to generate communication with your customers. Think of it as a prime opportunity to shine a little light on all the hard work that you do each and every day.

Depending on how much space you have left after listing any and all violations that occurred over the previous year (and we hope that you have plenty of space left), take some time to write a few paragraphs about any current projects that your system is working on or successes that you’ve had over the past year. Remember, a CCR is an educational tool and is a great way to educate your customers on the job that you do.

One good way to drive home the notion that a safe and reliable source of drinking water is clearly a great value is to offer up a few vital comparisons, such as:

- Lipton Ice Tea 16 oz for $1.19 = $9.52 per gallon
- Diet Snapple 16 oz for $1.29 = $10.32 per gallon
- Evian (water) 9 oz for $1.49 = $21.19 per gallon
- STP Brake Fluid 12 oz for $3.15 = $33.60 per gallon
- Pepto Bismol 4 oz for $3.85 = $123.20 per gallon
- Vicks Nyquil 6 oz for $8.35 = $178.13 per gallon
- Whiteout 7 oz for $1.39 = $254.17 per gallon
- Absolut Vodka 59.3 oz for $26.99 = $58.26 per gallon
- Cover Girl Nail Polish 0.4 oz for $2.79 = $892.80 per gallon
- Good Ol’ Tap Water = average $0.05 per gallon

And best of all, unlike the other products listed here, the water you provide is delivered straight to their house! So don’t hesitate to gently remind your customers of this simple fact.

Savvy water systems, public service districts, and sewer systems know that their success depends, to some extent, on good relationships with their customers—and their communities. So, go ahead and take advantage of this opportunity to create a little good PR while you have the chance.

Remember, the EPA gives you quite a bit of flexibility when it comes to the design of your CCR. So why not spend a few extra dollars and add an extra page to your next CCR letting your customers know what’s going on down at the treatment plant.

A Little Help From the EPA

While the thought of producing a CCR might seem daunting, remember that you aren’t alone. EPA has designed CCRiWriter to help you along. CCRiWriter is a Web-based program that allows water systems operators or designated personnel to enter data and generate a CCR.

This program walks users through all the required sections of the CCR, helps you convert lab results, and allows you to insert and edit the EPA’s recommended text into your own report.

Once you are done, many systems elect to go ahead and publish their CCR on the EPA’s Web site for their customers to view. It is also a great place to go and view the CCRs of other systems as you prepare to make your CCR even better in the coming years.

For More Information

EPA has other CCR-related resources on their Web site, including:

- CCRiWriter—www.ccriwriter.com
- CCR Fact Sheet—www.epa.gov/safewater/ccr/ccr-fact.html

Check to see if your system’s CCR is listed on the EPA Web site (or add your CCR if it is missing) by visiting http://yosemite.epa.gov/ogwdw/ccr.nsf.

The National Environmental Services Center offers a booklet with instructions about writing a CCR for small systems without computer access. To order this booklet, call (800) 624-8301 or e-mail info@mail.nesc.wvu.edu and request product number DWBLMG40.

This article was adapted from The Safe Drinking Water Trust e-Bulletin, a free e-mail bulletin about security, regulations, and safe and efficient operation of small water and wastewater plants. Developed by the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, the services is available at www.wattertrust.org.