

Public Outreach Campaign
Kaua'i Department of Water
January 1, 2011 to December, 2013

In 1990, the Kauai Department of Water completed a 20-year plan known as "Water Plan 2020". This was a comprehensive, long range planning effort to ensure that the Department continued to provide safe, affordable and sufficient drinking water in the 21st Century. In 2010, a rate study was commissioned, determining that it was critical for KDOW to raise water rates to ensure the proper maintenance of its aging system. This included an examination of the rates of consumer customers as well as large-scale corporate customers, agricultural customers and new developments.



Knowing that an increase in rates was inevitable to sustain the financial viability of its program and that the increase would occur during a depressed economic climate, KDOW sought public relations services for an outreach program to educate customers on the valid need for the increase.

We first carefully reviewed existing research provided to us by KDOW that was designed to ascertain attitudes about the Department. Using these data as a benchmark, our first recommendation was to conduct the more qualitative exercise of utilizing focus groups comprising existing KDOW customers to ascertain the prevailing sentiments about the KDOW and its service. We recommended two groups: a general consumer group and a business customer group.

The focus groups provided a wealth of information that considerably influenced the direction of our messaging for the ensuing campaign. In both groups, there was a notable request repeated for information about Water Plan 2020 and its current status. It became clear that although raising rates is never a popular initiative, customers would feel better if they were assured that progress was being made on the plan that was highly publicized in 1990. Additionally, the analysis indicated that customers would also be more inclined to accept a rate increase if they perceived it as "fair" (in other words, justified and appropriately spread among business, developers, agriculture and general consumers).

Utilizing our new information regarding messaging, a plan was developed comprising these components:

Development of key messages, to include

- a piece called "The Story of Water" to explain the complex systems that are required to bring water from rainfall to tap, namely, collection, storage, treatment and transmission,

- a piece called "Paying for Water" explaining the fiduciary obligations of the Kaua'i Department of Water,

- a document in lay terms to provide a current update on the status of all projects under Water Plan 2020,

- development of a micro-website where these pieces would be shared;

Development of a brochure, also conveying these messages and providing an indication that rate changes were under consideration;

Once the content for the new micro website was completed and the site designed, its launch was announced via a news release, along with a report on Water Plan 2020 projects. The local Kaua'i paper carried a positive story.

We then embarked on a series of "Talk Story" sessions, targeting key community groups and corporate customer segments. Consistency of our message was guaranteed by distribution of our brochure at all meetings. The KDOW manager addressed Rotary Clubs, professional organizations, and stakeholders such as tourism industry and agricultural customers. We also included individual outreach to important community influencers and spokespersons.

Additionally, we engaged in a media campaign to secure a positive story each month on a Water Plan 2020 project. We utilized creative photo opportunities (school children inside a huge water pipe) and political opportunities (a press conference with the Governor of Hawai'i to announce the completion of an important water main for West Kaua'i).

Results: A formal news release announcing the rate increase was issued in December with no community opposition.

Client Comment: "Using TLC PR as our partner, we succeeded in instituting a much-needed increase in our rate structure with considerable community input and understanding. It was a smooth transition that gave us an opportunity to explain our position to focus groups, key influencers and community organizations so that we encountered no objections when the rate increase was implemented."

David Craddick, General Manager and Chief Engineer
Kauai Department of Water