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PARTNER STORY

Simplifying Crisis Communications

The Laguna Madre Water District (LMWD) is located in the Rio Grande Valley along the coast of southern Texas. As a municipal water district, Laguna Madre serves approximately 11,000 customers across four different communities: South Padre Island, Port Isabel, Laguna Heights, and Laguna Vista. Laguna Madre, not unlike many other water utilities, faces the troublesome challenge of effectively targeting communication within their widespread customer base.

Laguna Madre Water District

LOCATION
Port Isabel, TX

POPULATION
10,935

MESSAGES SENT
3,000

ACCOUNTS SERVED BY WATERSMART
6,700

Laguna Madre Water District

THE CHALLENGE

Due to LMWD's geographically dispersed service area, it is not particularly effective to rely on local news and media coverage to communicate with customers when neighborhood-specific events occur. Customers across all four communities see headlines that may not be relevant to them, creating widespread confusion and concern across the entire service area.

To better serve their customers, LMWD created an emergency notification email service, which customers are able to opt-in to from the LMWD website. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the opt-in service and the necessity for customers to seek it out, participation remains low. In fact, less than 500 South Padre Island area customers have enrolled in the service. Despite having access to all customers' contact information in their customer information system, the software is incapable of sending outbound communications. In times of critical events such as an unplanned service outage or a mandatory boil water event, these challenges to communicate become especially apparent.

Known as a tourism hub, South Padre Island is the area's largest commercial area attracting an average of 36,000 daily visitors during the month of July. It houses resorts, businesses, and restaurants, as well as over 2,500 permanent residents. On one Tuesday afternoon in July, just as the workday finished and utility staff packed their bags to head home for the night, a utility contractor hit one of the main water lines going towards South Padre Island, causing a significant breakage in the pipe.

During the event, water was shutoff in some areas and a state-mandated boil notice went into effect. Crews worked long into the night to fix the damage and restore regular service, but customers needed to be aware of the ongoing situation and it was critical the word out to those affected in a timely manner.

According to LMWD Director of Finance, Eduardo Salazar, out of habit, staff began to do as they had done in previous situations. They immediately sent out email notifications using their old emergency notification list. They also contacted local news sources and posted information about the boil notice on their website. The concern however was that the communication methods they had long depended upon were limited in their ability to reach and specifically target South Padre Island residents and visitors. To overcome this challenge, staff turned to WaterSmart's Group Messenger.
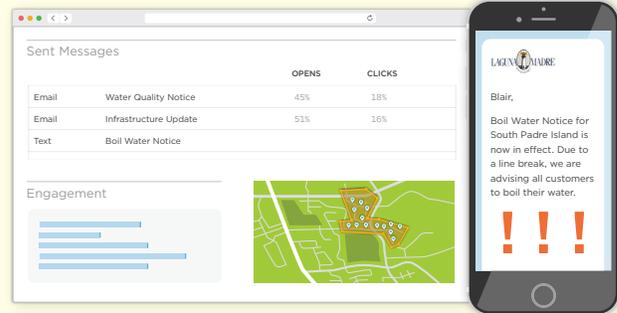
> "The ability to easily geographically target our messages was an incredible improvement."
>
> EDUARDO SALAZAR, DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

Group Messenger makes it easy to reach thousands of customers— or just a select few—by email, text, and automated voice.

A TARGETED SOLUTION

Group Messenger—a module within the WaterSmart Utility Analytics Dashboard—makes it easy to send targeted, personalized messages to groups of customers over e-mail, text, and automated voice. Staff can quickly select recipients from preloaded lists, draw a target region on a map, upload a GIS shape file, search accounts by account or meter number, or upload accounts from the Customer Information System or Meter Management platform.

Not only do digital communications reduce the time and hassle of customer outreach, which is especially important in times of emergency, but they provide the ability to dynamically customize messages based on specific customer characteristics, such as location. Additionally, the effectiveness of each message is automatically tracked by reach, opens, and clicks. With traditional methods of customer communications, this information was previously impossible to access.

MAPPING OUT SUCCESS

Eduardo and the LMWD team put Group Messenger to immediate use to relay the boil notice warning to South Padre Island residents. Staff quickly drew a polygon around the affected area, selecting all impacted

accounts, and began composing their message. This was the first time the utility had used the tool and they weren't sure how effective it would be. "Even if we reached only a handful of customers more with Group Messenger, we thought it was worth it to try" remarked Eduardo. Through this solution, they were able to reach approximately 1,300 accounts representing a 260% increase from the emergency notification opt-in list.

Once the boil notice had been removed, the team utilized Group Messenger once again to quickly notify affected customers, letting them know their water was safe to use again. In total, they sent out 3,000 messages with an average delivery success rate of 93% across email, text, and voice message, and a 59% open rate on emails, which is far above the industry average of 15% open rates. LMWD staff felt reassured that the right people had gotten the right information as quickly as they could.

Recounting the whole event, Eduardo commented, "Having the ability to easily draw on the map and geographically target our messages to affected customers was an incredible improvement." The Group Messenger tool reduced unnecessary confusion and

kept the right customers informed. This first experiment proved the value of the technology and LMWD has enthusiastically embraced this new method of targeted communication, opening the door to numerous future opportunities for Group Messenger use.

NEW PROCEDURES IN PLACE

Following the success of LMWD's first Group Messenger experience, the utility has made the decision to change their communication strategy to regularly rely on Group Messenger. Believing they could have turned to the messaging tool even sooner during the event, Eduardo remarks, "There are some new procedures that we are going to implement so we can continue to take better advantage of the system." He is excited to have more staff trained on the WaterSmart system so they are ready to utilize Group Messenger should another event like this occur in the future.

Continuing to better target their recipient lists and experiment with additional channels will allow the team to send pertinent information at the right times. Though emergency boil notices or unplanned outages are rare occurrences in Laguna Madre, with Group Messenger the team is equipped to easily send out messages about anything from community events to conservation notices, or even rate changes, all with just a few clicks of a button.
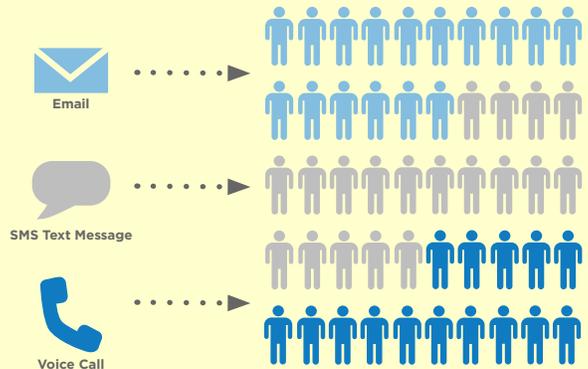
FOR MORE INFORMATION

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260%

INCREASE IN CUSTOMER REACH

Meet customers where they are

Email

SMS Text Message

Voice Call

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