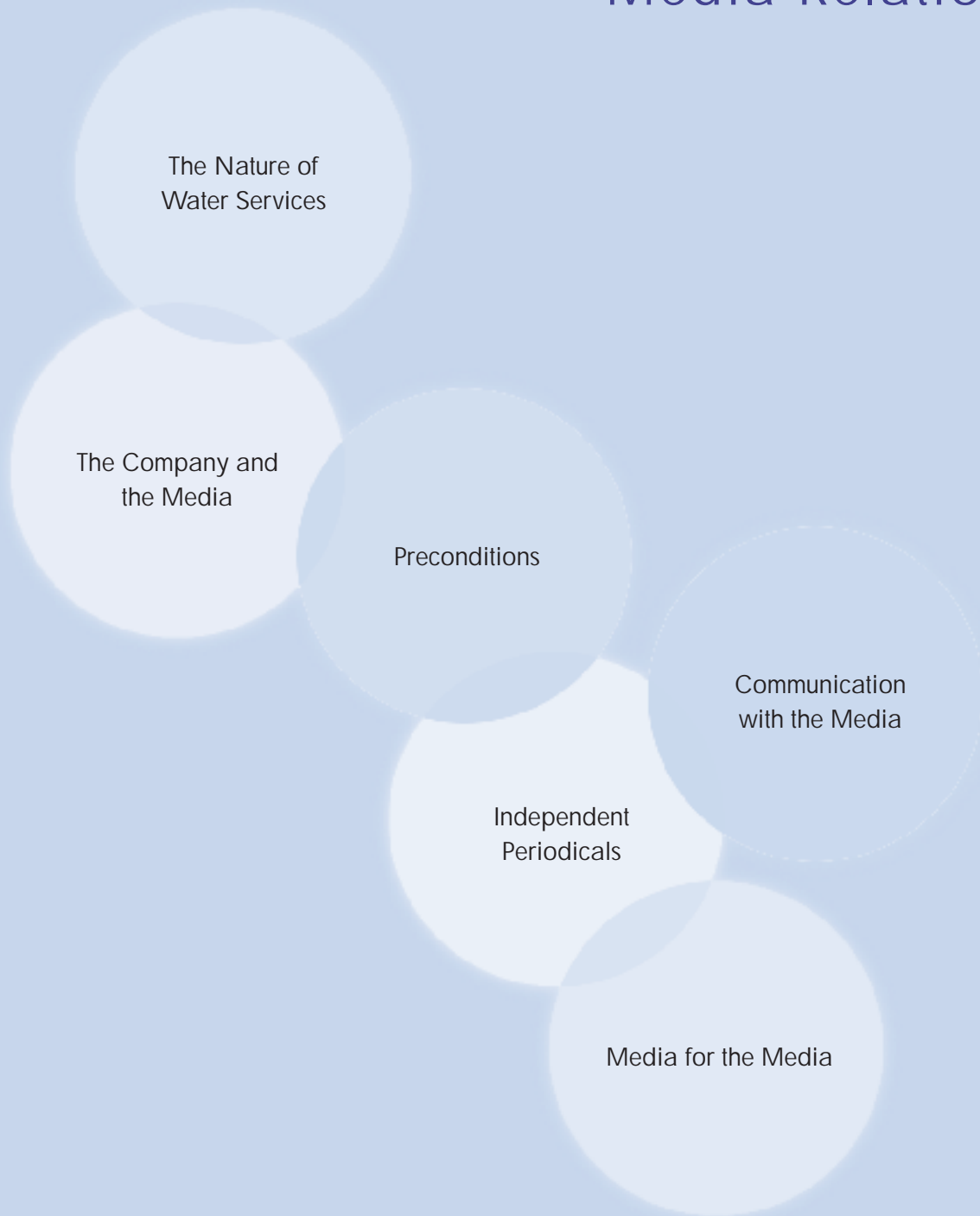


Media Relations



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PREFACE

Freshwater is key to sustainable development. Without adequate water supply food production declines, human health fails, the natural environment suffers and economic development is limited. Increasing population and increasing standards of living drive demand ever higher for drinking water, for irrigation of crops and for process water for industry. As these sectors take more water, less water is available for the natural environment. The World Bank estimates that some one billion people do not have adequate access to freshwater and two billion are denied adequate sanitation. So a critical challenge for society is to address these issues and strike the balance in the provision of future water services.

Water is the key issue and the International Water Services Association and the International Association on Water Quality are organisations devoted to playing their part in the provision of sustainable water and sanitation. Both IAWQ and IWSA are international professional associations, the former being founded in 1965 and the latter in 1947. IAWQ has sought to advance the science and practice of water treatment and water quality management and IWSA has been dedicated to advancing management, good practice and technology for the water services industry. Both organisations have high reputations in the international water supply and waste water sector and are already committed to merging their interests into a new organisation, The International Water Association, by 1999.

Solving today's and tomorrow's water problems requires the dedication and professional expertise of all the members of our organisations, but the message that freshwater is key to sustainable development also needs to be carried outside our organisations. Communication, and the work of communication specialists within water services, has a vital role to play in advocacy and awareness raising. We, therefore, commend this document as a good practical guide on media relations which should be of use to every manager within water services organisations. The booklet is also evidence of our two organisations working together and moving towards integration. A move that recognises that only by working together is it possible to come up with solutions for the future.

We end where we began, freshwater is key to sustainable development.



Mr Pieter E Odendaal
President of IAWQ



Mr W Nicholas Hood, CBE
President of IWSA

INTRODUCTION

In relation to the public and society the position of water and sewerage services has a high exposure potential, combined with the lack of understanding and insight in the world at large.

The IWSA Standing Committee on Public Relations comprises PR specialists from many countries meeting together with a view to exchanging ideas, experiences and practical knowledge on water issues in order to increase the professionalism and expertise of public relations and its contribution to the orderly management of water services.

As part of the Committee's work activities, I am very pleased to support the publication of this document on Media Relations. My personal thanks go to Eivind Fjelldal from Oslo Water & Sewage Works who chaired the group that produced the report. Eivind, and the team who worked with him, are to be commended for the time, effort and dedication that has gone into the production of this document. I personally hope that it will be a valuable aid to help managers involved with the provision of water services, to communicate those important messages to all stakeholders.



J W Oatridge
Group Services Director
Chairman of IWSA Standing Committee on Public Relations

February 1999

FOREWORD

A document like this can never be exhaustive. Concrete solutions in the complicated and rapidly changing area of media relations, just as in public relations generally, are bound to be local.

However, some aspects seem to be general, having relevance across geographical and cultural boundaries and divides. For instance, it has been essential to focus on how the nature of the water services creates both problems, challenges and opportunities in dealing with the media.

This implies both opportunities and limitations: Opportunities to shed light on some problems from different angles which might stimulate new approaches. The limitations lie in the fact variations can be so local that they can hardly be expected to have relevance for a broader audience.

Importance has therefore been attached to a broad approach by involving colleagues from different countries. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the following colleagues for their participation through editorial contributions, critical comments and stimulating discussions: Brita Forssberg, Sweden; Margareth Hajdú, Hungary; Steve Hodgson, United Kingdom; Carolien Hovenier, Netherlands; Gyöngi Jónás, Hungary; Annamária Kacsur, Hungary; Miklós Kiss, Hungary; Eva Munck, Denmark and Margarida Ruas dos Santos, Portugal.



Eivind Fjelldal
Head of Public Relations
Oslo Water and Sewage Works
IWSA Standing Committee on Public Relations
Chairman of Task Force for Media Relations

February 1999

FOREWORD

1-31 THE NATURE OF WATER SERVICES

1.1 EXPOSED

In relation to the public and society the position of water and sewage services has a high exposure potential combined with a lack of understanding and insight in the world at large.

Water services are essential and are supplied everywhere around the clock. Even minor aberrations are noticed immediately, frequently over large areas, and easily provoke reactions from users and the media. It might be said that there is a virtually permanent exposure potential with extremely narrow margins between zero and full attention.

Water and sewage services also suffer from the scourge of being invisible and highly reliable, so they are easily taken for granted. Apart from tap and plug hole, the majority of installations are more or less invisible – down in the ground, inside the mountain or off the beaten track. Out of sight out of mind. At the same time these services have very high regularity and so are easily taken for granted.

These factors contribute to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the constant importance of

- water and sewage services to the individual and society,
- what it takes to run and maintain them,
- future needs and new requirements for development, expansion, finance, environment, quality, service, etc.,
- the role played by the individual in water and the environment.

It is only the companies themselves which can change this by making their activities more visible.

1.2 MONOPOLY OBLIGATIONS

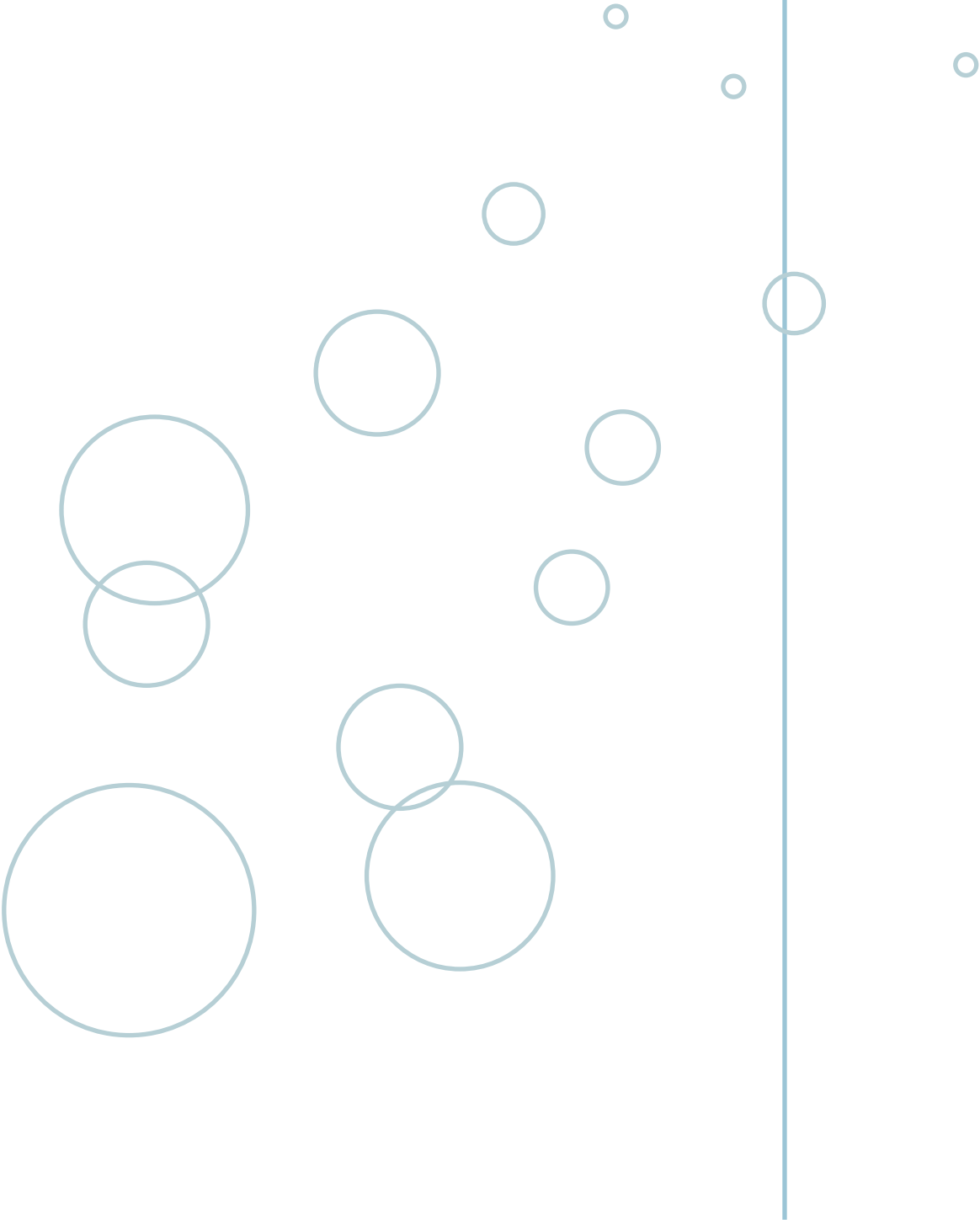
Public and media relations must be seen in the context of the *formal and informal obligations* which a monopoly supplier has in relation to society in general and various target groups. Recent years have also seen the growth of a strong awareness of requirements with regard to service and openness. Much of this has been formalised, e.g. the EU's Drinking Water Directive.

Suppliers have a duty to inform, and users have a right to information.

1.3 A GOOD STARTING POINT

Used properly, the exposed position of water and sewage services can form an effective starting point.

The media and public can be expected to listen precisely *because* these services are supplied to every home around the clock, *because* they have a high potential attention value and *because* they are essential services for which new requirements are being set.



2 THE COMPANY AND THE MEDIA

2.1 OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS

Through an active relationship with the media the company can create and correct a credible picture, image, of its operations.

This is based on identity – self-image, how the company sees itself – and profile — how the company wants to be seen by others through its arguments and message. The development of media relations should therefore be seen as part of day-to-day operational activities. This will create opportunities for positive publicity and the company appearing to be a credible source of news. This will increase the company's chances of obtaining exposure for its message.

In assessing the media it is fundamental to look at how publicity through media relations can best be used for the company, its operations, its short and long-term objectives, etc. *It is therefore a question of self-interest, which is just as legitimate as the other party considering its self-interest.*

This also reflects the fact that media relations mean mutual self-interest and dependence for both parties.

Editors and journalists are just as dependent on good, credible sources and their news as the source is interested in attention and publicity.

Those who prefer to hide behind anonymity or bureaucracy always risk being used by the press – without being asked and without the possibility of control. The interest becomes much stronger, more aggressive and less nuanced than that which they sought to elude in the first place.

The relationship of the company with the media is down to the company itself.

No matter what, there will be close contact with the media in difficult situations, crises and the like. It is especially at such times that you reap the benefits of having built up media relations and gained experience in meeting journalists and facing the public.

It is in war that you see what you have used the peace for.

2.2 MEDIA: SOCIAL FACTORS AND RESOURCE

The media are social factors on a par with political bodies, interest groups, the public sector, trade and industry, etc. (although less controllable), and are achieving growing influence through their role in investigative and critical journalism.

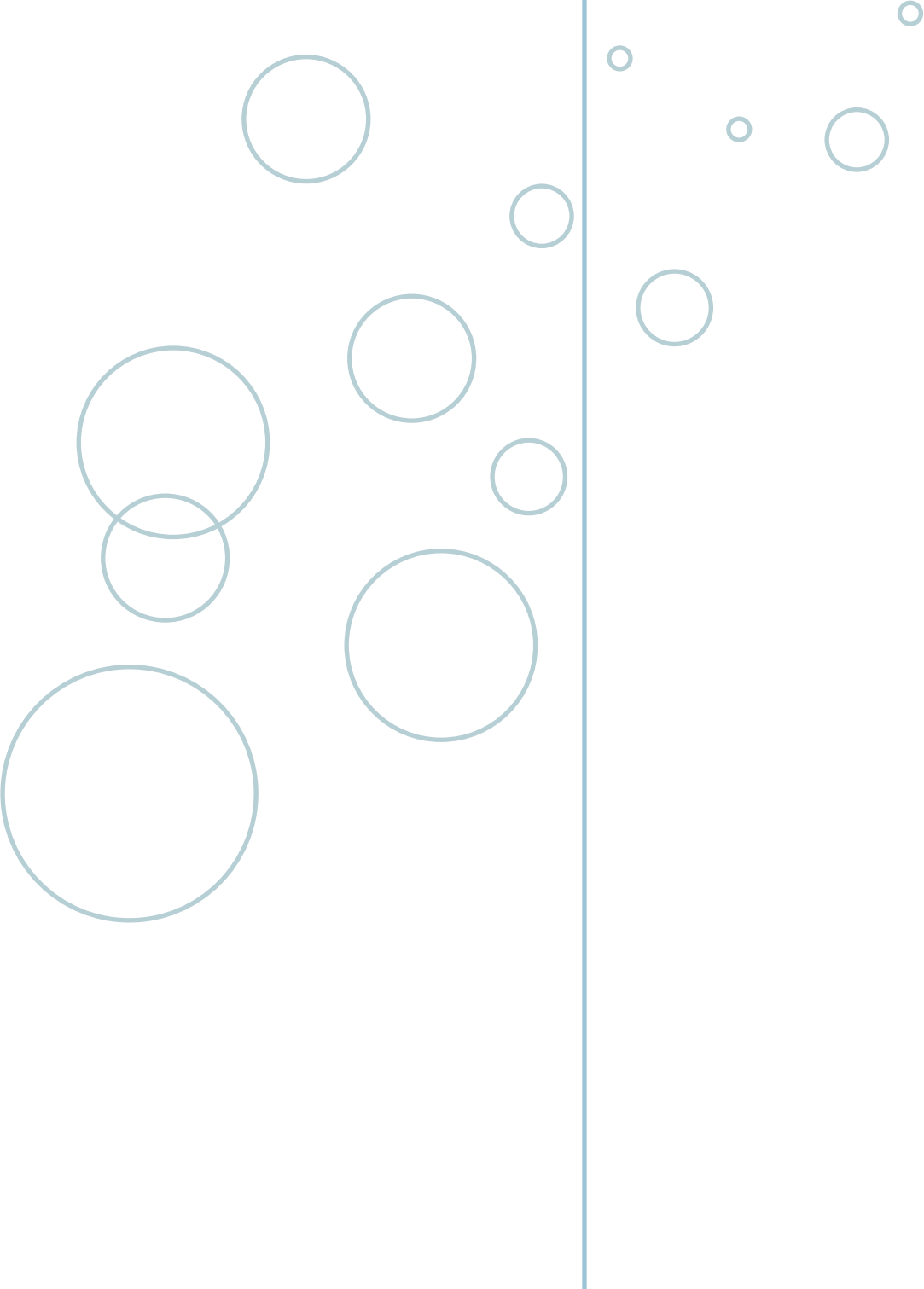
The media also represent an important resource because they can provide

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4.1.1

4.1.1

access to large target groups and therefore the opportunity to put your message across. The media are unavoidable in the daily battle for attention, something which is important in terms of, for example, economics and finances – directly or indirectly. The battle for money is the battle for opinion.



3 PRECONDITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA RELATIONS

3.1 GOAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The development of media relations requires a conscious attitude to the media and defined goals with regard to what you want to achieve.

3.2 MEDIA INSIGHT

3.2.1 Conditions and roles

Editors rule supreme in their choice of material – and the news picture changes quickly in the daily media. What is topical in the morning may have been prioritised out a few hours later.

Journalists in the daily media work to very tight deadlines and possibly on several subjects from very different areas of society in a single day. It is unreasonable to expect such people to have a particularly good understanding of every area. At the same time it is the journalist's professional task to look at things through the eyes of the layman.

In principle, every subject is new to journalists.

3.2.2 Adjustment and selectivity

Different media categories demand different approaches.

The daily media attach importance to news and have a different approach and set of priorities to periodicals, television requires visualisation, etc. While the message should be consistent regardless of the media, you may need to adapt the presentation of that message to suit the individual media needs.

3.3 FARSIGHTEDNESS AND CONTINUITY

Media relations need to be developed, and it can take time for the results to show.

This is linked to the fact that it is a question of *interest, credibility and trust*. The company must show that it is an interesting source of news, assert itself in the battle for the attention of editors (in which the rules are quick to change). The company must show that it is credible in different contexts, even when it may have problems. And credibility is a prerequisite for trust.

The company also needs time for *internal development* – to learn to understand what is of interest to the media and to learn to handle and exploit media inquiries correctly, etc.

Farsightedness is closely linked to continuity, with the emphasis on keeping the media informed about the company. In this way journalists become

familiar with the company and acquire a grounding in its operations.

3.4 ACCOUNTABILITY AND OPENNESS

Credibility and trust are created by accountability and openness. This means that statements, etc., are based on checkable facts, you do not manipulate, you are there even in difficult situations and acknowledge that there are problems and that you are working to solve them.

3.5 OWN RESOURCES

Media relations demand resources – to build up skills in the right employees, to spend time on the press, to make and answer inquiries, to maintain contacts, to prepare material, etc.

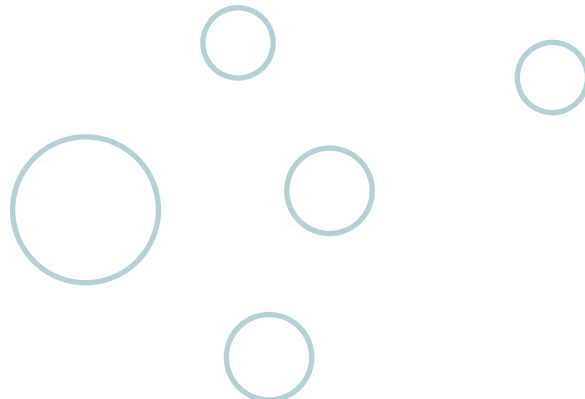
This also has *its own dynamics*: once a good level of service has been built up, it is expected to continue. Once an area of activity – or a company – has been perceived as interesting, the follow-up tends to come thick and fast, and questions and topics become searching and detailed. This demands resources.

This means that the company must allow for the possibility that it may become *a resource for the media*: be it about your own activities, as a reference for the industry or just because, the media will ring up to see if you have anything in stock (the media also have variable raw materials available). This represents a formidable declaration of trust and offers great opportunities for putting your own message across.

The need to build up media relations skills in the company can hardly be overstated. It is a continuous process that should be realised through specialised measures such as on-the-job training programmes, external courses, etc. Technical staff should also be included.

It is important that everyone in the organisation understands and acknowledges the importance of communicating successfully with the media.

3.3



4 COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA

Communication concerns how you meet the media and how they meet you. From the point of view of the water supply the vital thing is what you actually do and represent, what you offer and what requirements you set.

4.1 CONTENT

4.1.1 News

The media live off news, and an item of news has one or more of the following characteristics: it represents something surprising and sudden, it is different and out of the ordinary, it has an unknown outcome, it concerns either a person or a group, it is topical, it is commercial and can be sold.

3.2.1

News becomes old quickly, often in a few hours, or is displaced by other news. That is why you have to expect and respect the possibility that an interview may be dropped, a news item cut down, etc.

4.1.2 Be specific

The media are interested in specific cases and circumstances, not noncommittal generalisations. It is fine to present binding plans, for example, but not empty intentions or dreams.

4.1.5

The media are oriented towards the consequences for users and society – not special, technical matters or other minutiae which mean little to the man in the street.

4.1.3 Stick to the facts

This means

- sticking to facts you know,
- refusing to speculate,
- relating to the facts – adopting an attitude to them.

4.3.3

Such orderly behaviour makes it easier to handle delicate matters, difficult situations, etc.

There are really no alternatives to the facts: concealment, denial, avoidance, manipulation or direct lying destroys your credibility, in which case you really are in dire straits. A good journalist always spots evasive answers and will seek information elsewhere – or speculate.

4.1.4 No comment?

No comment can be both a correct and a good answer – as long as you say why.

4.3.4

Not commenting on something does not fly in the face of accountability, openness, etc. As long as you show consideration for the customers and public, it is up to the company to decide whether it wants to make a com-

ment to the media on the basis of self-interest, expediency, relevance, etc. The reason for refusing to comment should be explained as far as possible.

4.1.5 Be self-critical

This works both ways: What is important or interesting internally does not need to be so for other people.

Conversely, it is easy to underestimate the media potential of your own company. Correctly presented and visualised, a great many aspects of the water and sewage services can capture the public's interest.

4.1.6 Anxiety and water

Uncertainty about the water supply automatically creates anxiety in many people.

That is why companies must be very precise and make clear statements about and in abnormal situations, encouraging the media to do the same. It may be, however, that assurances are not always enough, with the undefined anxiety being encountered in questions such as " –but how can you be so sure?!" You have to have an answer to this at an early stage and take every opportunity to put it across to the public.

4.1.7 Good opportunities

Over time a number of opportunities to call on the media will present themselves - either because the situation demands it or because the company wishes to focus on special circumstances. Some examples:

- Qualitative and quantitative changes in services
- Threats to services (drought, flood, contamination, technical break down, etc.) and their consequences.
- Changes in rates/prices
- Major construction work and its effect on the environment
- Major investments
- Opening of new plants, installations, etc.
- World Water Day

4.1.8 Active, preferably proactive...

Active means that you take the initiative to provide information yourself.

Proactive means that this is done in advance if possible – before a situation occurs, before a project is started, etc.

This also takes care of the requirement for news.

4.1.9 ...particularly with bad news...

A proactive strategy means that you are first *even* with your own bad news, if possible with information on how you intend to solve the problems in question. This gives you a head start and enables you to control or at least influence the presentation to a decisive extent.

At the same time you avoid problematic but essentially undramatic cases or situations becoming information-dependent crises as a result of being passive.

6

4.1.8

4.1.9

4.1.1

Such situations are also an excellent opportunity to focus on what it takes to run water and sewage services.

4.1.10 ...in a sensible manner

A proactive strategy requires critical understanding and good sense too. It would, for example, be counterproductive to make a song and dance about a problem which may be serious enough, but is limited to a small number of households and is being taken care of. In such cases statements to the press can get a whole town worked up for no reason. In the event of inquiries from the media, you point to what is being done for those affected and explain what the problem involves.

4.1.11 Be prepared!

The better prepared presentations, press material, etc., are for the needs of editors and journalists, the greater the chance of making an impact. As a rule it is a matter of simple measures such as news profile, short length, illustrations and contacts. This means that the company also has to spend time formulating and wording its messages, including consequences and precautions for users and the environment.

The most important prerequisite for getting a message across is knowing what you want to say and how to say it.

4.1.12 Exploit the situation

Contact with or inquiries from the media can be exploited in several ways, for example:

Focus on the underlying circumstances of the case or situation in question beyond the news framework.

The company's plans for the area in question or other areas.

Inside information on topics or cases which might be of interest and which the company would like publicity for.

4.2 ORGANISATION OF MEDIA SERVICES

4.2.1 Accessibility versus consistency

Irrespective of how media services are organised, the question of accessibility and consistency is vital.

Media services can be organised in a number of different ways, but three models seem to dominate:

Centralised service – all inquiries are answered by PR staff and/or the managing director.

Inquires are channelled to the PR department, which then finds the right person to answer it and is happy to discuss how the inquiry should be handled.

Decentralised service – it is left up to the individual to answer inquiries concerning his area of responsibility.

Both centralised and decentralised solutions have their weaknesses:

A centralised solution makes special demands with regard to real

2.1

3.5

accessibility being maintained. For example, a PR department will quickly become understaffed and act as a bottleneck if it is not properly resourced.

The main thing for the media is that the company is accessible. A decentralised solution makes special demands on internal communication if answers to the company are to be consistent. This is particularly important in the case of questions relating to principles, matters of a general nature, policy and the like.

Consistency is vital to the credibility of the company.

4.3.1

4.2.2 Know your friends

Many companies consider it necessary to maintain stable links with the press, often particular journalists with whom the firm is in contact or can get in touch.

Such lists may, however, also include journalists and media who should be handled with care when it comes to certain types of material, etc.

This approach has its limits, however, mainly because journalists and editors change their area of work or job, editorial priorities change, etc.

The more acute a situation is, the less advisable it is to rely on the availability of editorial contacts.

4.3 INTEGRITY

4.3.1 One or all?

Inquiries *from the media* should be treated equally.

In the cases of approaches to the media *on your own initiative* you are in principle free to decide whether to disseminate information about a case or news to *everyone or on an exclusive basis*. A good journalist contact will learn to value being the first to know. This requires careful consideration, however, it would create conflict if the company were to consistently favour one particular journalist or editor over time.

The specific *case or situation* must be evaluated carefully. If the information is vital to large groups, you should be careful of favouritism.

Favouritism or exclusivity has *clear limitations* in any case:

it stops once the news is out, after which all the editors are entitled to receive the same service.

It may also be that another editor gets wind of a piece of news which is in the offing. In such cases you must go back on exclusive agreements.

4.3.2 Good connections: reciprocity, sensitivity, respect

Between journalist and source there exists a mutual dependence which is also sensitive.

The successful development of media relations will bear the stamp of co-operation and open communication. You get to know each other,

understand each others thoughts, needs and professionalism.

The same journalist may get in touch about a disagreeable matter one day. If the relationship of trust is to be maintained, it is vital for the company to *maintain communication*, i.e. accessibility should not just be a fair-weather phenomenon.

The value of good and generally close media relations lies in each of the parties looking after their own standpoint, independence and integrity while respecting the same qualities in the other party.

There must never be any doubt about what interests the parties represent – media relations must never lead to embrace.

4.3.5

4.3.3 Off the record?

Against this background you should also be extremely cautious about speaking off the record, even to a journalist you know well and trust. The person in question may be put in a difficult professional dilemma. Agree, for example, to return to the case or question at a given time when the circumstances may be clearer. If we were to give just one piece of advice in this situation it would have to be “don’t do it”!

In conflicts you must always expect a journalist to follow his professional code.

4.3.4 Setting limits

Service and courtesy do not mean *that you should allow yourself to be walked all over*. You have your own *integrity and interests to look after*. You have a right to time to deliberate, gather information, etc. If an editor is pushing for a comment or statement just before a deadline, that is his problem.

Above all you have a right to be treated seriously. Some questions may be so far-fetched or irrelevant that it is appropriate to dismiss them. Similarly you may be justified in turning away journalists who you know will not behave seriously – in extreme cases the editor too.

Journalists and the media also have to be credible. The media demand this from us, and companies and people have just as much right to make similar demands in the other direction.

3.2.1

4.3.5 Agreements

If, for example, you cannot answer or receive an inquiry here and now, agree a time with the journalist when you can call him back – and do it. If there is a compelling reason for backing out of an agreement, let the person know as soon as possible. Expect the same in return.

5 INDEPENDENT PERIODICALS

3.2.2

The independent specialist periodicals occupy a special position in relation to the daily media. They prefer long-term, broader perspectives, problems and subjects to brief news of current significance.

They are often left in the shadow of the daily media, and undeservedly so, as they actually have an invaluable role to play in the communication of knowledge and understanding to non-specialist groups too. They represent a valuable link between society, companies and specialist environments, and frequently have associations with research environments too.

The daily media are probably cleverer at making use of such periodicals as sources and background material than many specialist environments are at obtaining exposure through them. One of the reasons for this may be that the company does not have enough resources, for example, to write articles itself or assist journalists. Another reason might quite simply be lack of knowledge or experience.

6 OWN PUBLICATIONS: MEDIA FOR THE MEDIA

The majority of large waterworks and their industrial and professional bodies have their own publications, ranging from simple internal newsletters to magazines and Internet pages.

The contents of such publications can often be utilised in relation to the external media. Properly used they provide an opportunity to present cases, plans, problems, etc., in much greater depth and breadth than through a rolling news service concentrating on cases of current significance. The recipient will get direct information and highly professional sources in the water service industry.

It is doubtful, however, to what extent this happens or whether editors

really make use of such media. On the one hand this may be an area of untapped potential, while on the other hand many of these publications may have to be improved considerably before they become attractive to editors.

Some good signs:

Topical contents

As with other information, the situation now and in the future is of most interest. With just three issues a year, for example, much of the contents can easily be about what happened two or three months ago. The closer an event or development is to the date of issue, the more editorial priority it should be given.

Background

The above section should not be an obstacle to elaborating on matters which happened some time ago provided they are still of relevance.

Accessibility through appropriate presentation

This might, for example, involve something as simple as illustrations or a summarising framework which can also include explanations of any special technical terms which are used, for example.

Accompanied by other contact with the media

It is a good idea to send highly specialised publications to ordinary news editors together with a press release which draws attention to articles of particular relevance or topicality.

Contacts for follow-up

These contacts must be accessible.

6.1 INTERNET?

With the Internet information can be made available locally and globally in a short time. Use of the system still seems limited, however. This may be because the system is still new and development of the necessary IT capacity varies both from country to country and within countries.

Background information and general information such as annual reports are put on the net, but material of a more direct nature such as daily news, etc., is less common.

The Internet certainly brings plenty of opportunities, but also obligations with regard to updating. Obsolete information on the Internet is a common sin and makes a poor business card.

As far as journalists are concerned the Internet can supplement but never replace personal contact.

