



PARTNER STORY

Enhancing Engagement Digitally

Santa Margarita Water District (SMWD) is the second largest retail water agency located in Orange County, California. It serves 165,000 customers across the cities of Mission Viejo and Rancho Santa Margarita, and unincorporated parts of Orange County that include Coto de Caza, Las Flores, Ladera Ranch, Rancho Mission Viejo and Talega. SMWD, like many other water utilities, is continually improving its strategies for communicating with a diverse customer base.



Santa Margarita Water District

LOCATION
Orange County, CA

POPULATION
165,000

MILES OF PIPELINE
1,200

WATER SOURCES
Imported and locally recycled

ACCOUNTS SERVED BY WATERSMART
55,000

Santa Margarita Water District

THE CHALLENGE

Situated between Los Angeles and San Diego, SMWD has no local media market. No single news channel, radio station, or print newspaper adequately covers the service area, and overlapping service areas can result in customer confusion in cities like Mission Viejo that are served by numerous water utilities. As a result, SMWD's challenge is to develop effective strategies to engage with their customers.

Bill inserts often seem to be a tried-and-true approach, but they are far from perfect. "We worry that our bill inserts are bypassed by customers," says Nate Adams, Water Efficiency Administrator for

SMWD. When messaging does not relate the amount of a water bill, it is typically ignored. This means the cost of designing and printing these inserts is rarely recouped. In addition, it is nearly impossible to measure how effective inserts are at engaging customers or communicating critical information.

Another challenge in reaching end-use customers is the nature of the billing schedule. "Getting content out to our customers in a timely fashion can be problematic" says Nate. If a time-sensitive communication is needed, it may not be possible to rely on a monthly or bi-monthly bill insert. Door hangers are an option, but these are expensive and time-consuming to deploy.

Overcoming these challenges becomes especially critical each spring when SMWD promotes its annual water festival. It's an afternoon of food, music, and fun that also raises awareness of the value of water services. The event is a great opportunity to interact with customers, provide educational information on appliance rebates and water audit programs, and thank the community for their ongoing support. Making sure customers are aware of the festival is crucial to the event's success.

"Having greater visibility into engagement makes a huge difference."

NATE ADAMS, WATER EFFICIENCY ADMINISTRATOR



A TARGETED SOLUTION

Group Messenger—a module within the WaterSmart Utility Analytics Dashboard—makes it easy to send targeted, personalized messages by email, text, and automated voice. Staff can quickly select recipients from a preconfigured list, by searching, by selecting areas on a map, or by uploading accounts from a



NO MORE GUESSWORK

Nate and his team put Group Messenger to use to help SMWD accomplish its customer engagement goals for the water festival. Staff crafted two sets of emails: One set targeted single-family residents, and another targeted multi-family residents. In total they sent approximately 20,000 messages.

Unlike previous years, when Santa Margarita staff wondered if messages in the bill inserts had been received, there was no more guessing. “Having greater visibility into engagement makes a huge difference,” says Nate. Both the single-family and multi-family messages averaged a 40–45% open rate, which dramatically exceeded the industry standard 15% open rate. “We were pleasantly surprised to find that our customers were opening and reading our message,” enthused Nate.

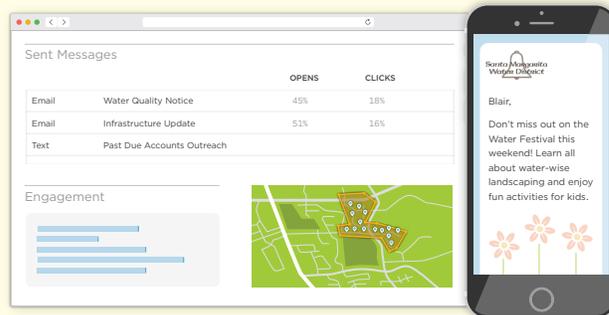
The overwhelmingly successful performance in reaching customers resolved any remaining concerns for Nate’s team on how digital engagement would be received. This initial campaign verified the effectiveness of the technology and SMWD enthusiastically embraced digital engagement.

Customer Information System or Meter Management platform. Utilities use Group Messenger for timely outreach to specific customer segments about service outages, community events, water quality reports, rebate programs, rate changes, and much more.

Digital engagement reduces the cost and hassle of customer outreach and it leverages intelligence that already exists within utility data. Recipients are targeted by characteristics such as location or water use, the message content is dynamically personalized, and the effectiveness of each message is automatically tracked by reach, opens, and clicks.



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



HOT DOGS FOR ALL

When it came to the day of the water festival, the SMWD staff was eager to see if the digital messages would result in a quantifiable response, and it did. “We had more people than we had ever had before. We even ran out of hot dogs not once, but twice!” Nate happily recalled staff making two additional trips to the store during the event to please the 2,000 people that attended. Outside of sending 20,000 digital communications, SMWD had not changed any of their marketing efforts from past years. Group Messenger made a tremendous difference, resulting in a 50% increase in attendance.

BUILDING ENGAGEMENT

The lessons learned are clear: “It is critical to gather emails for our customers. Without a good amount of customer contact information, our impact is minimized,” shares Nate. Going forward, the SMWD team is excited to explore additional uses for Group Messenger. As they continue to fine-tune and filter their recipient lists and experiment with additional channels, they can send the most pertinent information, at the right time, to the right customers, with just a few clicks.

Armed with these new digital engagement tools, Nate and his team have a new level of confidence when communicating with SMWD customers. Nate says, “We look forward to continuing to engage with our customers through personalized communications to build support for our utility initiatives and increase customer satisfaction.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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NATE ADAMS, SANTA MARGARITA

WaterSmart Software provides intelligence beyond the meter to make the lives of water utility managers easier. Water providers using WaterSmart’s cloud-based, customer engagement and analytics platform have been proven to reduce costs, protect revenue, and increase customer satisfaction by more than 25%. Come help us change the way the world uses water.