



It Starts at Home: The City of Meridian's Public Outreach Campaign

Recent work in the water industry has focused on raising the public's awareness of the value of water. Generally, the public understands the need for safe drinking water, sanitation, and trash/recycling service but this is not often linked with a personal responsibility or desire to support these services. Effective communication about the role of local utilities and creating a personal link between the infrastructure and ratepayers is critical for the success of public works projects and having an overall positive impact on the environment. It is also important for utilities to build a level of trust with the ratepayers.

This combination of raising public awareness, while having an impact on the community's environmental quality, are the goals of the public outreach program. As a result of these educational goals and initiatives, Meridian's Environmental Division of the Public Works Department worked with consultant HDR to develop and produce a series of graphic animations with a similar thing of "It Starts at Home". The purpose of the animations is to link the activities we routinely perform at home without giving it a second thought (showering, laundry, flushing the toilet, dishes, throwing out trash) with the required treatment and use downstream. Meridian uses the animations as an opportunity not only to educate but also to inspire behavior change and support for the local utility.

The three animations are Meridian's Wastewater Utility, Meridian's Water Utility, and Solid Waste and Recycling in Meridian. The Environmental Division selected Meridian utility ratepayers as the target audience to share information about "where their money goes" and "what they are getting for their money". The result is an educational tool with insights to our treatment systems, processes, and utilities, providing insights to the City's operations and sustainability efforts, therefore encouraging them to become better stewards of our natural resources. The solid waste and recycling animation was completed in partnership with the City's franchised service provider, Republic Services.

The wastewater, solid waste and drinking water animations were developed through a storyboarding process, which identified the key messages the City wanted to deliver to the public. The script and graphics were drafted and used as the basis for the future animations. The final animations came together by animating the graphics, photographs, and video clips to match the recorded script. The result was an educational, but multigenerational tutorial of what we can all do to become a more sustainable society through various methods of preservation. The wastewater animation demonstrates the complex network of service lines, lift stations and treatment processes that connect each household to the wastewater treatment plant. The solid waste and recycling animation shows viewers what we, as citizens, throw away and how small changes at home can have a big impact in our community. The drinking water animation describes drinking water treatment, distribution, water protection, and conservation through the eyes of children. Through entertaining and quick viewing animations, we tell the story of how we serve our citizens and how the citizens can become stewards of their public and private utilities.

Since June of 2013, the City of Meridian has distributed over 1,380 CDs of the Animation, shown the Animation at over 14 WWTF Tours to college students, civic groups, newly elected Meridian City Councilmembers and youth groups. To date, we have received more than 2,720

hits on YouTube. More than 20 outreach events have occurred in the last year, which included high school science classes, elementary schools, career fairs, Earth Day events, Public Works Week EXPO, Meridian Town Hall Meetings, Association of Idaho Cities Conference, City Hall tours, STEM Teachers Presentation, and AWRA Presentation.

The animations describe how the City of Meridian as an agency operates. Each animation gives a glimpse into the processes that occur before drinking water arrives and after the wastewater and trash leave the house. The animations are well suited for a wide age-range of viewers. In the adult setting, such as the Meridian Chamber of Commerce presentation, the water and wastewater animations have served as a platform from which to discuss our municipal rates, the anticipated wastewater NPDES permit, our region's water quality issues, and insight into the solid waste services available from our franchised hauler, Republic Services. The graphic animations serve as a platform for thoughtful questions, engaging dialogues and an overall increased understanding of the requirements, resources needed and benefits of our public utilities.

In the classroom setting, the younger age groups (1st through 3rd grades) enjoy sitting in groups on the floor and watching what they perceive as a fun cartoon! Prior to showing a graphic animation, Environmental Division staff prep the class with the topic of the day and how it relates to what they are about to see. Staff encourages the students to remember one or two key scenes of the animation, which are then discussed afterward. Once the animation starts, the kids are hooked by the upbeat music, the colors, the quick scene changes, the energetic script, and animated figures – staff were delighted to see the classrooms giggle, take an audible intake of breath, and above all 'focus' on this six minute education piece. At the end of each animation, the kids clap, immediately start talking and raise hands to let us know what they saw!

The utility-focused graphic animations are providing a positive interface to discuss key aspects of public services. While staff inherently recognize that our utilities provide a fairly profound level of service in a quiet, unassuming manner, it has been an awakening to witness the level of inquiry, passion and interest expressed by our audiences. These smaller, carefully-scoped measures of education and outreach provide benefits to our public over time, as we strive to encourage citizen stewards of our utilities and our natural resources.

Additional components that are a part of the City of Meridian's overall outreach program include:

- Coloring sheets that are used in classrooms along with the animations (see attached).
- Don't Flush Unused Medications – fliers and bill stuffers (see attached).
- *It's a Toilet, Not a Trashcan* bill stuffer, adapted from the Water Environment Federation.