

**Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District: Social media presence / PROGRAM NARRATIVE**

Effective social media relies on responsiveness and creativity, two key elements that are central to the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District's social media presence. By implementing a social media strategy that reaches customers and engages in timely conversation, the Sewer District has developed an aspect of its customer service and community outreach that is unique among utilities.

**TIMELINESS**

In 2012, the Sewer District partnered with Baldwin Wallace University on a customer awareness survey to determine its effectiveness conveying its messages across the service area. The survey revealed, among other things, that one-third of customers interviewed considered social media as a primary source of their news. This realization justified our emphasis on this new venue and offered us important direction to help develop a formal strategy and incorporate “social” personality in our organizational [Strategic Plan](#).

We believed timeliness would be critical, both in how we post relevant content to the appropriate social accounts, and how quickly we respond to customers' interaction.

Social media is not a 9-to-5 customer-service tool. It is constant, and requires regular monitoring and responsiveness at any hour of the day, depending on the social network in question. We strive to respond to customers' questions and mentions as quickly as possible, particularly on Twitter and Facebook, even well after traditional work hours. [Weekends](#), late nights, and early mornings are when most users are most active online, so we are dedicated to using these hours for posting key content and engaging with customers as interactions arise. Being responsive and easily accessible has proven to [build trust](#) among our followers and makes the Sewer District's accounts frequent mentions when relevant regional and environmental topics are discussed.

## ORGANIZATION

Not all social media channels are created equal, and the audience expectations are unique within each network. We understood this and structured the accounts' content to meet those expectations.

Our content organization begins [on our blog](#). The blog is the primary destination of our social media activity where we can explore topics in greater detail and inform customers of our work. Since our blog's launch in 2007, we have received more than 258,000 page views, sharing photos, videos, and educational resources.

Twitter followers demand immediacy and relevancy. Our [@neorsd](#) and [@WallyWaterdrop](#) accounts offer timely commentary and promote relevant educational resources, but also integrate [humor](#) to transform content that would be otherwise mundane to non-water-professionals into appealing news that connects our work to interests already important to them. Whether it's the [return of LeBron James to Cleveland](#), or finding [odd relationships between cell-phone habits and public toilets](#), Twitter allows us to join the conversation and meet customers where they are.

Our [Facebook page](#) is similar. By growing an audience of nearly 4,000 followers, we tailor our posts to appeal to its demographics—often posting after work hours and on weekends when traffic is typically higher—while [injecting humor where appropriate](#).

Besides these primary accounts, we also manage a presence on [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Pinterest](#), and now [Ello](#) to help expand the reach and variety of our messages.

As with any social media initiative, planning is key. We shared our lessons and suggestions at the Ohio Water Environment Association *One Water Conference* in August, and also made our [recommendations available online](#) for any utilities considering a launch of a social media program.

## QUALITY OF THE DESIGN ELEMENTS

All of our content is generated in-house. Our Communications staff authors [blog posts](#), takes [photographs](#), designs [infographics](#), and creates [videos](#) to help tell the story of wastewater treatment in a fun and original way.

We have designed [13 original infographics](#), including our #WaitToTweet graphic whose [Twitter campaign](#) was noted in the Water Environment Federation's [September 2014 issue](#) of *Water Environment & Technology* for creatively engaging customers.

Our [YouTube account](#) features original video content, most recently a series of [QuickClips](#) featuring one operator's own explanations of timely industry topics in one-minute-or-less snippets.

And our blog routinely touches on current events by finding ways of working clean-water issues into the [news of the day, even the Fourth of July](#).

We understand that customers' time is valuable. Well-designed content keeps visitors coming back and helps make our name both relevant and memorable.

## **INNOVATION**

A recent example of social media innovation was actually beyond the scope of our “traditional” social media. But due to key elements it shared (timeliness and transparency), we consider it a social media success.

When Cleveland newspaper *The Plain Dealer* prepared to run a [series of articles](#) on our \$3 billion Project Clean Lake plans, we knew the writers would be hard-pressed to present the full story, perhaps resulting in frustrated or misinformed dialogue in the paper's online comments section. We were correct. In response, prior to press and during the series itself, we posted [three relevant blog](#) stories and then [created an official NEORS D voice](#) as a commenter who could participate in the dialogue following the article. Once the series began, our NEORS D account was able to add to the discussion, answer questions, and clear any confusion. We also offered links to our blog stories and other resources we knew could highlight details of the program, all while engaging respectfully and honestly.

The presence, similar to an active and informed social media presence in general, was not common in the industry, but served as a model for engaging our media outlets and our customers in important conversations in the future.

## **EASE OF USE**

Social media is inherently easy to users all over the world. But users' habits are varied and the technology is always changing. That is why we constantly monitor web traffic and social trends to stay relevant to what audiences expect.

We also respect our audiences' interests. Rather than only promoting what we find interesting, we find ways to connect our followers' most interesting news to aspects of our work. This demonstrates that we know how the social networks are used, and it shows that we are actively listening to what our followers are talking about.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Social media is not the only way a utility reaches its community. But a successful communication strategy accounts for social media in its outreach efforts. The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District's social media presence features creativity and timeliness, humor and professionalism, variety and relevancy, all with the intent of serving customers, earning their trust, and staying true to the work that keeps our Great Lake great.