

Efforts by the Service Stations toward Progress as an Accessible Service Base

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Abstract: Customer service stations have been making efforts to spread information locally by participating in community events held by ward offices, conducting public relations for the Bureau of Waterworks, Tokyo Metropolitan Government (hereinafter referred to as the Tokyo Waterworks) and posting bulletins customized for the community. In order to provide emergency water supply promptly and precisely in the event of water supply suspension caused by a disaster, service stations aim to improve the disaster prevention ability of communities by conducting training on a regular basis. Inquiries made to service stations are mainly about water charges, but also include water quality and water conservation, so service stations are required to play the role of concierge. To make use of this contact from customers in our measures, service stations are working to dig deeper into the opinions of customers. By accelerating initiatives to close the gap with customers in the community, service stations will be more accessible and familiar places, eventually enhancing the credibility of the Tokyo Waterworks.

Keywords: Information dissemination to the community, positive contribution to safety and security of the community, accessible water concierge

1. Introduction

In recent years, customer needs for water have become increasingly sophisticated and diversified, and thus service stations are required to respond to wide range of needs, including not only stable water supply to waterworks, but also safety, good flavor and disaster risk management. Under such circumstances, the role expected for the service stations has changed dramatically.

The service stations play a primary role in office work for collecting charges, including processes for reception and changes to water service user agreements, calculating charges based on water meter readings, and dunning and collection work for unpaid charges after bills are sent. Among these, routine tasks have been streamlined by outsourcing them to private sector firms. Typical examples of this include opening a call center specialized in reception, outsourcing regular meter reading work, and outsourcing notification of unpaid charges.

However, in recent years, service stations have actively conducted various tasks conforming to the actual circumstances of their communities, such as spreading information via public relations tightly involved with the community, and initiatives in disaster countermeasures in cooperation with local authorities such as ward offices and municipal governments. These are initiatives to enhance the public relations function and disaster prevention function that make use of the strength of service stations, which is the ability to conduct face to face exchanges with customers.

In the following discussion, we focus on the new role of these service stations to verify advanced initiatives so far, and consider the right direction towards further evolution as regional service bases.

Research data and methods

As the subject of research, we will focus on 3 different roles of service stations: (1) The role as a base of information distribution to the community, (2) The role of supporting the security and safety of the community, (3) The role as an accessible water concierge. We will summarize the results and challenges of past initiatives, and based on this, we will consider and research the direction for further development and expansion.

Research results and content of investigation

(1) The role as a base of information distribution to the community

(i) Communication with customers at community events

Service stations participate in community events held by ward offices and neighborhood councils to conduct “Water Service Consultation” and public relations for the Tokyo Waterworks. Booths are also set up on the street in front of train stations and shopping districts to conduct public relations timed to coincide with Waterworks Week every June.

Core content of these events includes the “Tap Water VS Mineral Water Taste Test.” To spread awareness among customers of the great flavor of tap water made possible by advanced water purification, they are given an opportunity to taste test tap water and mineral water, then share their feedback and opinions on a questionnaire. This taste test has proved popular with visitors lining up every time, and has contribute greatly to waterworks public relations, including the economic efficiency of advanced water purification and tap water, and various initiatives taken by the Tokyo Waterworks to reduce environmental burden.

Also, in order to introduce earthquake countermeasures taken by the Tokyo Waterworks, service stations display panels with maps of Disaster Water Supply Stations which provide drinking water when water service is suspended and display seismic resistant fitted pipes which can prevent breakage and leakage even in the event of a major earthquake.

Furthermore, in 2016 and 2017, droughts have continued in dams upstream on rivers that are the source of water for Tokyo Waterworks, and intake restrictions were implemented. For this reason, at events in these 2 years, service stations displayed graphs of reservoir capacity in these dams that serve as our water sources, asking for cooperation with water conservation efforts while also conducting public relations to raise awareness of the issue.

In this manner, we have selected timely content based on the actual circumstances of communities, and devised eye-catching visuals to engage in public relations activities. [Figure 1]

[Figure 1] “Water Service Consultation” at an event booth



These public relations activities at local events are a valuable opportunity to gather opinions from customers by meeting them face to face. We are working to use these events to conduct mutual communication with customers who visit booths for taste testing and exhibits, such as by explaining various initiatives conducted by the Tokyo Waterworks, and asking for their feedback and opinions on water service.

But we also face challenges in these public relations activities conducted at local events.

For example, one of the challenges is that the age group of customers who visit these events are primarily seniors or of child-rearing age. As a result, we conduct relatively little public relations to customers in their 20s and 30s and receive few opinions from them.

For this reason, we actively seek feedback from customers in their 20s and 30s at event venues so that we can get opinions from and conduct public relations to a wider range of age groups.

In the future, we will make efforts and devise new strategies to hear the voices of a wider age group of customers, such as by advertising appearances at community events and street events on the Tokyo Waterworks website and social media in advance.

(ii) Information distribution to the community by publishing bulletins

The Tokyo Waterworks conducts public relations by providing timely and comprehensive information based on distribution through press releases, as well as digital media including its website and social media accounts. Conducting public relations via digital media makes it possible to distribute information in an accurate and instantaneous manner to an unlimited number of customers.

Waterworks are a lifeline rooted in the lives of our customers, so service stations work to distribute a variety of local information in collaboration with the authorities of those communities.

Distributing information on websites, it is difficult to deliver information concerning only specific communities to the customers in those communities, such as our participation in community events mentioned in (1) or our emergency water supply drills conducted in collaboration with ward offices, schools, and neighborhood councils. For this reason, it is necessary to utilize ward offices and local communities to distribute information through literature circulated by local public facilities and neighborhood councils.

Therefore, each service station independently publishes bulletins with content such as information specific to each community and the major measures taken by the Tokyo Waterworks, in order to complement comprehensive public relations made with websites and social media.

These community bulletins are delivered in the format of paper leaflets, with the purpose of distributing information to customers who live in the community under the jurisdiction of each service station. Therefore, in addition to distributing these leaflets to neighborhood associations and neighborhood councils for circulation, we have taken steps to ensure they reach as many customers as possible, such as by distributing them at facilities with many visitors, including metropolitan hospitals and metropolitan tax offices, as well as ward offices, libraries, and train stations. [Figure 2]

[Figure 2] Community bulletins produced by service stations



There are also challenges to face.

For example, there is that it takes approximately 1 month from when a bulletin is completed until it is published and distributed, because bulletins are printed on paper.

For this reason, community bulletins tend to focus on articles that introduce content prepared in advance for public relations, so it may be difficult to introduce the latest information in a timely and appropriate manner. For example, it is difficult for these bulletins to deliver information that must be delivered immediately, such as droughts or accidents.

Therefore, in order to provide information as quickly as possible about events that occur suddenly, such as major incidents, calls to prepare for droughts, and warnings regarding unscrupulous business practices, it is necessary to distribute information on our website and social media.

(2) The role of supporting the security and safety of the community

(i) Emergency water supply drills at water supply bases

The Tokyo Waterworks has developed waterworks facilities that are resistant to earthquakes, such as seismic retrofitting of purification plants and transmission and distribution water pipes, and duplication of water supply routes, in order to prevent water service suspension.

However, when water service is suspended because of damage to waterworks facilities from earthquakes, we must restore facilities as an emergency measure, and strive to restore water service as soon as possible.

At the same time, the Tokyo Waterworks conducts emergency water supply activities in order to provide drinking water until normal water supply is resumed. For waterworks utilities which have a mission to supply water uninterrupted 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, and these emergency water supply activities are a very important role indeed.

So, when water service is suspended due to an earthquake, the Tokyo Waterworks conducts emergency water supply activities for residents at “Disaster Water Supply Stations”.

These “Disaster Water Supply Stations” include the following three types.

Water Supply Bases

There is 1 water supply base within a 2 kilometer radius of any residence, for a total of 212 in all of Tokyo (including purification plants, water supply stations, and emergency water supply tanks)

Water Supply Trucks

Vehicles such as water supply trucks are used to distribute water to evacuation sites and other such locations that are far from water supply bases.

Fire Hydrants

In order to complement emergency water supply at water supply bases, municipalities install temporary faucets on fire hydrants on roads near evacuation centers that have been designated in advance.

Of these, the Tokyo Waterworks has concluded agreements with the 23 central wards of Tokyo regarding emergency water supply activities conducted at the “water supply bases” described in above, so these activities are divided between the staff of Tokyo Waterworks and the staff of ward offices.

The role of service stations is to quickly assemble staff at bases to install temporary water supply faucets, and set up “Disaster Water Supply Stations” so that emergency water supply can be offered to customers. In tandem with this, the staff of ward offices serve the role of distributing water to customers at these “Disaster Water Supply Stations”.

For this reason, each service station regularly conducts emergency water supply drills at water supply bases such as purification plants and water supply stations, so that they can conduct emergency water supply activities promptly and precisely after an earthquake. To improve the skills of staff who participate in drills, the Tokyo Waterworks broadly announce the role of staff prescribed in manuals, and

strives to ensure effectiveness with the goal of learning actual procedures through on-site training.

In implementing emergency water supply training, not only Tokyo Waterworks staff but also ward office staff and residents are called to participate in this, so they too play roles that contribute to improving disaster prevention capabilities of their communities.

[Figure 3]

[Figure 3] Emergency water supply drills (In collaboration with ward offices)



(ii) Initiatives to raise awareness of water supply bases

One water supply base is located within a 2 kilometer radius of any residence, and as of February 1, 2018, there are 212 such bases established within Tokyo. In preparation for large-scale disasters involving water service suspension, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has developed these water supply bases so that every resident can reach one in walking distance.

However, there is not necessarily adequate awareness of water supply bases. In a questionnaire conducted by the Sumida Service Station at their “Water Service Consultation,” in June 2017, 71 people (31%) said they do know, while 158 people (69%) said they do not know about water supply bases.

Now that there is growing risk of an earthquake with its epicenter under Tokyo, as we conduct daily public relations in preparation for a disaster, it is a pressing task to notify people of where they can go to get drinking water when water service is suspended.

As mentioned in part 1, service stations have worked to raise awareness by notifying customers in the community of their nearest water supply bases by conducting community events and publishing community bulletins.

Specifically, service stations display panels with maps showing the nearest water supply bases, and distribute clear folders and pamphlets showing water supply base maps.

In order to advertise emergency water supply, service stations also conduct interactive events. At these events, customers who visit the booth can try carrying 6 liters of water in “emergency water supply bags,” which are filled with water at water supply bases.

Generally, customers bring their own containers to fill with water at water supply bases, including plastic tanks and PET bottles, but the “emergency water supply bags” which customers use at the events have advantages, as they can be worn as backpacks in order to carry water while leaving both hands free.

Customers who experience wearing an “emergency water supply bag” are presented with these bags as gift items, which have proven very popular.

(3) Role as an accessible water concierge

(i) Transition from waterworks service stations for collecting charges to a water service concierge

As a service counter for water charges collection, stations handle various inquiries and consultations from customers regarding the start and stop of water supply agreements, calculation of water charges, and payment of unpaid charges.

Against a backdrop of rising awareness of the environment and safety, the content of consultations span a wide range including consultations and requests for surveys about water quality, such as whether or not it is possible to drink tap water, as well as inquiries about how to use water efficiently and how to preserve tap water for later use.

In the past, as public relations events during Waterworks Week, service stations have opened booths at community events and in front of train stations, and held on the spot “Water Service Consultations,” and it is no exaggeration to say that such roles are required of them on a regular basis. In other words, it has become more and more necessary for service stations to serve a role as a familiar concierge that customers can consult with broadly about the use of water supply.

In order to smoothly conduct this service at service stations, we think it is necessary to train staff that have acquired business knowledge and can respond to a wide range of inquiries as a water concierge, and station them at business offices.

We have already post frequently asked questions on our website. We will keep the FQA updated at all times. Furthermore, we can use this FQA as teaching materials for staff of service stations. And then, we, service station staff, will be able to answer questions from customers more effectively.

In the future, we plan to devise strategies to raise motivation among employees, such as establishing a skill certification system for water concierges, while also making mechanisms that make them feel their jobs are worth doing.

(ii) Active listening to and consideration of “customer’s voices”

Service stations communicate directly with customers, mainly responding to inquiries and complaints about water charges. In other words, the basis of customer support is to listen directly to the voices of customers, and service stations are in an excellent position to do so. In the future, it will be necessary to use the advantages of these service stations to improve customer service.

For example, by responding to complaints from customers seriously and properly, we can develop trust in the waterworks business and improve operations. In order to utilize the voices of customers as valuable opinions rather than mere complaints,

it is important to enhance the quality of communication with customers, and understand the psychology of customers to grasp their true intentions.

As such, service stations have recently started initiatives to interview customers, listen to their voices, and consider what they have to say.

In recent years, the effectiveness of big data using ICT has been demonstrated in various fields and has attracted attention as a means to develop new business opportunities.

The Tokyo Waterworks hears the voice of many customers on a daily basis. By taking these customer voices brought to service stations, customer centers, and the various departments of the Tokyo Waterworks and converting them into a database, they are expected to not only serve as materials for considering important measures, but also to be used as ideas for new measures.

We believe that using cutting edge ICT, which has benefitted from remarkable technological innovation to improve service, will be the key to responding quickly to the changing times and constantly develop the waterworks business.

Initiatives to collect customer's voices and reflect them on policies may not deliver results immediately. However, by continuously communicating with customers, we are confident that we can shorten the distance between the Tokyo Waterworks and customers, improve understanding of the waterworks business, and lead to improved service.

Conclusion

To many customers, service stations are simply places to pay water charges, and as a proportion, there are not many customers who come to service stations for other purposes or who make inquiries by telephone. For the staff as well, service stations are mainly a place for charge collection work, so they often consider public relations and public hearings to be incidental work.

However, as the needs of customers grow more diverse and sophisticated, service stations have found the relative and overall importance of public relations and public hearings work to be greater than ever.

In the future, it will be necessary to enhance the public relations and public hearings functions of service stations even further. In order to do that, it is important that we expand information distribution to communities even further regarding the major policies of the Tokyo Waterworks and activities of service stations, and also listen to the voices of customers so as to improve our policies.

As mentioned above, by further accelerating various initiatives to shorten the distance between customers in the community and the Tokyo Waterworks, we believe it is possible for service stations to evolve into places that are closer and more familiar to customers, and eventually raise confidence in the waterworks business.