


<p><i>Consumer communication and feedback</i></p>	<p align="center">Consumer Acceptability Data Case Study: Yarra Valley Water, Australia</p>		
<p>Region: Victoria</p>	<p>Water Supplier: Yarra Valley Water</p>	<p>Size: ----- <i>Number of employees: 400</i></p>	
<p>Country: Australia</p>			<p>----- <i>Number of consumers 1.5 million</i></p>
<p>Important Notes to users: <i>This document provides practical experiences in water quality management which may be of interest to other water suppliers. The information is provided in good faith but users must ensure that any action taken based on this is assessed in the context of their own local situation and particularly any national or regional legal requirements.</i></p>			
<p>Summary Consumer trust depends not only on the consistent delivery of good safe water but also how they perceive its quality. Consumer acceptability data can be extremely valuable in many steps in the development and implementation of a WSP. This case study provides an example of a water supplier in Australia which has undertaken research to understand consumer expectations in relation to water quality. This includes the use of surveys and focus groups. It also describes the approach the company takes to handling, recording, and reviewing complaints.</p>			
<p>Detailed information Yarra Valley Water provides water and sewerage services in North East Melbourne, Australia, and serves an area of approximately 4,000 km². It is the largest of three metropolitan water companies that serve all of Melbourne and who compete with each other to provide the services. It seeks to achieve the best service in delivering a reliable supply of high quality water and sewerage services to the 1.6 million residents and 50,000 businesses within its service area.</p> <p>A single entity provides Yarra Valley Water and the other Melbourne suppliers with bulk water and provides the operations and management of drinking water catchments (e.g. reservoirs), large-sized water and sewerage mains, as well as water treatment plants, and major sewage treatment plants.</p> <p>Drinking water quality management Most of Yarra Valley Water's drinking water comes from protected catchments, managed by <i>Melbourne Water Corporation</i>. The protected catchments areas are areas of uninhabited mountain forest and have been closed to public access for over 100 years. This was done to ensure high quality of water from source, and reduce the requirement to treat the water to meet the required health standard.</p> <p>Yarra Valley Water business area is located directly downstream of the catchments areas. Around 80% of the drinking water supplied to customers is not filtered, requiring only disinfectant (e.g. chlorine) to ensure the safety of water delivered. As a result, Yarra Valley Water's drinking water systems receive a high level of natural sediments in the distribution system, which often contributes to dirty water complaints from customers. In addition, there is the potential for taste variations in the water supply due to seasonal variability (e.g. high flow in summer and low flow in winter and the need to switch between reservoirs catchments, depending on water availability).</p> <p>Extensive cleaning programs for water tanks and water mains are performed to remove natural sediments in the distribution system. However, cleaning of water mains is currently suspended (2009) due to the drought as the cleaning process uses significant amounts of water.</p> <p>Yarra Valley Water's Customer Charter states that its customers can expect the following:</p>			

- water that meets the relevant health standards, as specified by the health regulator *and*
- water that is free from objectionable taste and odour.

To ensure safety of the water, Yarra Valley Water maintains a Risk Management Plan, which incorporates Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP). The HACCP system is accredited under the 3rd party HACCP Accreditation system. In addition, there are extensive monitoring and maintenance programs to continually verify and ensure high quality of water.

Management of customers' expectations on water quality

In communicating the HACCP approach to water quality Yarra Valley Water's key message to customers is:

"You can take the quality of your water for granted because we never will".

This promise is backed up by research to ensure that Yarra Valley understands customer expectations and maintains high levels of customer satisfaction. In the last financial year, customer satisfaction peaked, with 100% of customers surveyed ranking Yarra Valley Water's performance in overall service and product quality as good to excellent.

Surveys and focus groups

A *Customer's Service Expectation Survey* is conducted every 6 months. The survey covers a broad range of topics, including water quality. The survey aims to ensure Yarra Valley Water's effort to maintain and improve quality of water matches its customers' expectations. The survey also measures customer satisfaction levels with services provided by Yarra Valley Water, including issues being resolved to customers' satisfaction.

From time to time, Yarra Valley Water also conducts *Focus Group Workshops* on specific issues. The last workshop was performed prior to the suspension of the water mains cleaning program where a group of customers were invited to discuss whether they would accept marginally higher sediments in their taps, in order to conserve water during drought. The outcome of the workshop was in favour of water conservation.

Communication programs

Yarra Valley Water is open and transparent about their water quality. Every month, results of water quality monitoring are posted on the website, and list of all incidents and number of complaints are published in its Water Quality Annual Report.

By maintaining good relationship with Melbourne Water Corporation, Yarra Valley Water is able to notify customers immediately when there is a change in their water supply. This is one method of managing customers' expectations.

External research programs

Yarra Valley Water is a member of a number of research organisations such as Water Quality Research Australia and Water Research Foundation (formerly Awwa Research Foundation). The membership allows Yarra Valley Water to ensure best practice is employed in their day-to-day operations.

Over the years, Yarra Valley Water has participated in numerous research programs to improve water quality. A number of research topics centred on improving service in customer relations and customers' perceptions of water quality.

As an example, Yarra Valley Water carried out research into customers' willingness to pay for further expenditures on water quality improvement. The result of this research has dictated many strategies for water quality investments at Yarra Valley Water.

Case management procedure

Based on past research and surveys, customers who submit several complaints on water quality in a year, are referred to a dedicated *Case Manager*. The *Case Manager* will investigate, liaise and resolve the issue to the satisfaction of each customer. This service aims to provide the customer with a high level of issue resolution, and ensure that their issues are being dealt with by Yarra Valley Water.

Monthly complaints data are reviewed, and 'new' customers are referred to *Case Managers*.

When complaints are health-related, it may be managed under emergency management procedures, which includes incident management.

When all attempts to resolve the issue are exhausted, and customers are not satisfied with the resolutions, they may go to the *Ombudsman*, to have their case heard further, and an independent decisions made. The *Ombudsman* is an independent arm of government which attempts to resolve complaints from the general public about other government departments.

Typical resources used:

Customer Service Department (Case Managers), liaison with research organisations, survey specialists

Contact for further information:

To be confirmed

Document status:

Author	Date
MWH	August 2009

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