Executive Summary

Introduction
The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) is a bi-county agency in the State of Maryland established to provide water supply and wastewater treatment services for people in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. WSSC is the 8th largest water and wastewater utility in the nation, serving nearly 1.8 million residents and approximately 460,000 customer accounts in Prince George’s and Montgomery counties over an area of nearly 1,000 square miles. They operate and maintain eight water and wastewater plants, more than 5,500 miles of fresh water pipeline and nearly 5,400 miles of sewer pipeline.

WSSC’S MISSION: We are entrusted by our community to provide safe and reliable water, life’s most precious resource, and return clean water to our environment, all in an ethically and financially responsible manner.

WSSC’S VISION: We will become the world class provider of safe, reliable water/wastewater services that protect the health, safety and quality of life for our community.

- Customers are delighted with our excellent products and services.
- Relationships with our customers, employees and business partners surpass expectations.
- The environment is improving as a result of our efforts.

Quality…always.

WSSC’S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:
- Infrastructure
- Financial Stability
- Workforce Management
- Procurement
- Customer Service
- Security and Safety
- Communications and Stakeholder Relationships
- Environmental Stewardship
Objective

WSSC wished to address strategic initiative concerns with their commercial and residential, water and/or sewer rate-paying customers, through a customer satisfaction survey effort.

Goals included:

- Developing a performance measurement and diagnostic tool to determine customer satisfaction and perception of the WSSC, its services and customer relations;
- Understanding what customers value, what services they desire and how they perceive rates as compared with other utilities;
- Providing recommendations and strategies to enhance customer relations and provide excellent service; and
- Identifying the WSSC brand in the market and make recommendations toward the improvement/development of a branding program.

Key areas identified as the focus of the customer satisfaction survey included:

- Water Quality – Odor, taste, clarity, confidence, etc.
- Billing Rates – Satisfaction, value, comparison to other utilities
- Communications – Outreach efforts, information dissemination, agency reputation, environmental activities
- Level of Service – Responsive, friendly, quality maintenance, expeditious, etc.
- Branding – The image the brand portrays

Methodology

WSSC partnered with Maryland Marketing Source, Inc. (MMS), a full-service market research company, to facilitate the success of this research endeavor. MMS was charged with completing 3 tasks:

- Task 1: Segmentation analysis to determine an appropriate sampling plan
- Task 2: Survey development and administration
- Task 2: Data analysis, reporting, and tabulation

Telephone surveys were conducted among 1,000 WSSC Residential customers (500 in Prince George’s County and 500 in Montgomery County) and 200 WSSC Commercial customers (100 in Prince George’s County and 100 in Montgomery County). The majority of the survey instrument was asked of both Residential and Commercial customers, with certain sections tailored specifically to reflect the language and services appropriate for each segment. Residential customers were contacted during evening and weekend hours, and Commercial customers were contacted during normal business hours.

Interviewing took place between June 16th, 2011 and July 27th, 2011. At a 95% confidence level the overall margin of error for the 1,200 completed surveys is +/- 2.83%. For the residential segments the margin of error is +/- 4.93% and for the commercial segment it is +/- 9.83% within each respective county.

A note about statistical significance: a result can be called statistically significant if it is unlikely to have occurred by chance or due to sampling errors. However, if the base size is too low, or the difference between the variables in question is low, any variance that can be deemed statistically significant may not necessarily be substantially important according to each situation. The practical importance of statistically significant results should always be further evaluated by the subject matter experts.

Charts, tables, and graphs may not total 100% due to rounding and the exclusion of missing variables from the analysis (“no answer” and “don’t know/refused” percentages).
WSSC Customer Key Driver Satisfaction Models

The WSSC Customer Satisfaction Study surveyed both residential and commercial customers located in the Maryland counties of Montgomery and Prince George’s. Mirroring the survey design, two primary Key Driver Customer Satisfaction models were developed: one for residential customers and the other for commercial customers. A weighted Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) score was calculated for each of the models. Additionally, both models were segmented by county and a CSI in turn calculated for each county, generating a total of six CSI scores (see Tables 1 – 6 on the following pages).

Multivariate analysis was employed, principally factor and regression techniques, to develop the models. Each model consists of a number of key drivers (or factors). More specifically, the Residential model is composed of seven key drivers:

- Company image;
- Overall bill handling and value of service;
- Water quality;
- Informing customers;
- Payment for infrastructure maintenance/upgrades;
- Agents; and
- Field personnel.

The Commercial model consists of four key drivers:

- Company image and informing customers;
- Water quality;
- Payment for infrastructure maintenance/upgrades; and
- Overall bill handling and value of service.

These key drivers are, in turn, comprised of multiple performance measures and each performance measure is represented by its “mean” value reported on 0-10 scale.

Each key driver is also assigned a weight according to its impact on customer satisfaction. (In each of the 6 tables, the weight for each key driver is shown in parenthesis next to the key driver.) For example, in the residential customer model, company image has the greatest influence on customers’ satisfaction with WSSC, with a weight of .27 (out of 1.0). Similarly, company image and informing customers is the most influential key driver in the commercial model, with a weight of .417 (out of 1.0).

The residential model shows moderate strength in explaining customer satisfaction. Its R Square value is .46 (out of 1.0). In other words, the model explains 46% of the variation in residential customers’ satisfaction with the WSSC. By comparison, the commercial model is more powerful in this regard, with an R Square value of .73, a score that is considered strong.
Examination of the primary Residential and Commercial Customer Satisfaction models reveals both similarities and differences regarding key drivers. Given that the two customer groups were asked the same questions, with a few exceptions, the similarities are anticipated. The differences may be attributed to the size of the commercial customer sample and the number of commercial customers answering various questions. There were only 200 commercial customers interviewed compared to 1,000 residential customers. For some of the questions, the number of commercial respondents dropped off significantly, especially for those questions involving interaction with employees such as agents and field personnel. In the case of commercial customers there were too few respondents for the employee-related questions to permit successful computation of factor analysis, thus these two potential key drivers had to be excluded from the model. Another consequence of the relatively small number of commercial respondents is the failure of “company image” and “informing customers” to split into two key drivers.

Key Findings

➢ WSSC customers are very aware of who they are and what services they provide.
  o The majority of study participants were able to verbalize that WSSC was an acronym for the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.
  o The vast majority of respondents were aware that the WSSC provides ‘clean water/water utility’ service to their customers.
  o More than half of Residential respondents in Montgomery County and Commercial respondents in Prince George’s and Montgomery County, as well as just under half of the Residential respondents in Prince George’s County are aware that the WSSC provides ‘treatment and collection of wastewater/sewage’.

➢ Study participants mostly obtain information about the WSSC via ‘bill inserts’ and ‘Pipeline’.
  o They utilize the WSSC website as well, but not nearly as much considering that the vast majority of respondents do have access to the Internet.
    • One third of Prince George’s County customers and more than one quarter of Montgomery County Customers have visited the WSSC website at least once.
    • More Residential than Commercial customers have visited the website as well.
    • Customers agree that they are less than fully satisfied with the information provided by the WSSC website.
  o Residential customers also rely upon ‘other direct mail pieces/postcards’, and Commercial customers still utilize the ‘telephone’.

➢ Almost 9 out of 10 study participants have not signed up for the WSSC Customer Notification System (CNS).
  o More than half of the Residential customers and more than two thirds of Commercial customers have not signed up because they have ‘never heard of it/[are] not familiar’.
  o Respondents also cite that they have ‘no interest’ in signing up.
  o Those who do utilize the CNS believe it to be moderately useful.
  o Respondents who haven’t yet signed up for the CNS remain unlikely to do so at this point.

➢ In general, WSSC customers feel they could be much more informed about water related advisories such as main breaks, water restrictions, and boil water advisories than they currently are.
Within the past 12 months, more than two thirds of study participants state that they have ‘never’ called the WSSC.
  - Commercial customers in Montgomery County have done so the most and also have had to call more than once to have an inquiry resolved.
  - Residential respondents who have called the WSSC have done so recently regarding:
    - ‘Billing questions’,
    - ‘Service problems’, and
    - ‘Water main/sewer breaking’.
  - Commercial respondents who have called the WSSC have done so recently regarding:
    - ‘Service problems’, and
    - ‘Water main/sewer breaking’.

The ‘courtesy of the agent’ was the highest rated Customer Care factor, and the ‘time it took the agent to resolve your inquiry’ was rated the lowest.

Prince George’s County reported the highest Customer Care satisfaction levels compared with Montgomery County.

Residential respondents in Prince George’s County are significantly less satisfied with their water quality than are respondents in each of the other segments.

Commercial respondents rated each aspect regarding their water quality higher than did Residential respondents.

Less than 5% of Residential and 8% of Commercial customers have had their water tested within the past 12 months.

Customers report high levels of satisfaction with their WSSC ‘billing cycle’, the ‘billing options that are available’, and with what they ‘pay for the services they receive’.
  - Residential respondents have no strong preference for being ‘billed monthly instead of quarterly’, and
  - Approximately two thirds of customers overall ‘would use the electronic bill pay option with WSSC if there was no fee for doing so’.

Few participants overall have interacted with WSSC field personnel within the past 12 months.
  - Commercial customers within Montgomery County also have the highest overall satisfaction with regard to their most recent interaction with WSSC field personnel.
  - Respondents were the most satisfied with the ‘courtesy of [the] field personnel’.
  - Customers were the least satisfied with the ‘time it took field personnel to resolve the issue’ and the ‘ease of scheduling service’.

Montgomery County respondents were much more satisfied than Prince George’s County respondents with their experiences with WSSC’s Development Services Center.
  - Commercial customers in Prince George’s County agreed the most that ‘the materials provided…were helpful & informative’, and Commercial customers in Montgomery County agreed that ‘WSSC staff was helpful’.
  - Both counties provided the lowest scores when asked if ‘WSSC staff was knowledgeable’.
➢ WSSC customers agree that it is very important to me that the WSSC have strong plans to fund and rebuild its system of pipes and other assets in order to maintain safe and reliable service, however, they are less enthusiastic about the concept of having to pay more in order to help the WSSC rebuild its infrastructure because, it would seem, they are not convinced that the system is very old and if we do not spend more money on it now there will be more pipe breaks and inconveniences.

➢ Montgomery County customers would be more willing than Prince George’s customers to pay an increased rate for water and sewer services so that service and repairs can be addressed in a timely and speedy manner.

➢ The impact to the community, which could possibly include boil water advisories, traffic changes, temporary business closures, and limited water supplies, was ranked as the ‘most important’ possible effect of a water main break to study participants in each segment.

➢ Commercial customers seem to have a more positive view of the WSSC overall than do Residential customers, and Montgomery County residents seem to have a more positive view of the WSSC than do residents of Prince George’s County.
   • WSSC meets federal and state water quality requirements was rated the highest by Residential and Commercial respondents.
   • Residential and Commercial respondents rated the WSSC is active in my local community with educational and environmentally friendly events the lowest.

➢ All things considered, study participants were moderately satisfied with the utility service they receive from the WSSC.

➢ Taking into account everything they may have heard, read, or seen, study participants have a slightly positive opinion of the WSSC as a company.
Conclusions and Next Steps

Awareness of who the WSSC is and what services they provide is very high overall. Customers in each segment are familiar with the organization as well as what basic services to expect from them. Based upon the quantitative research findings, there are several areas in which the WSSC shows strength, as well as areas in which there are opportunities for improvement.

➢ Communications and Customer Care
  o Areas of Strength: Customer Care agents and field personnel were rated very highly for their courteous deportment when interacting with WSSC customers. These employees are the voices and faces of the WSSC for the majority of customers and the high ratings they have received reflect positively upon the WSSC as an organization. Customers highly value the way they are treated, especially since they are mostly in contact with an organization to solve a problem of some sort, so these high marks should be praised.

  o Opportunity for Improvement: Respondents agreed that they, as well as the Customer Care agents and field personnel with whom they have interacted, would benefit from more information. WSSC staff needs to be better informed so as to be better able to better communicate with customers, answer customer questions, and resolve customer concerns. Customers also need to be access information about general topics, long-term projects, and also immediate issues as they arise. WSSC can find opportunities to improve in this area by updating their website, becoming vocal in the community via social media, and promoting customer use of the Customer Notification System (CNS) via strategic marketing messages.

➢ Infrastructure
  o Areas of Strength: Customers are on the same page when it comes to how important it is for WSSC to plan for the future and proceed with projects that will maintain and improve the infrastructure.

  o Opportunity for Improvement: Although customers want uninterrupted service, high quality water, and a reinforced system of pipes and other assets, they do not want to have to pay more out of their own pockets for it. The WSSC has an opportunity here to develop methods for framing the overall process as a partnership between WSSC and its customers so that, in working together, the future of the water and sewer systems can be assured. By educating customers about the infrastructure, how it all works, what projects additional funds would go towards, how to conserve, and involving them in the overall process could make them feel that their contributions are positive and rewarding.

➢ Image
  o Areas of Strength: Respondents have a positive view of the WSSC and agree that the WSSC acts with integrity and meets federal and state water quality requirements.

  o Opportunity for Improvement: Study participants are not dissatisfied with the utility service they receive from the WSSC, however there are many opportunities to improve the WSSC’s image overall. This is especially true of Residential customers, whose view of the WSSC is less positive than that of Commercial customers. The WSSC needs to cultivate methods in which to further publicize their success stories, outreach efforts, and customer focused events and ideology.
Next steps

- Now that the WSSC has clearer view overall of where their strengths lie and where they have opportunities to make positive changes, the next step is to hone in on each in order to develop some actionable goals. By engaging in qualitative research, the WSSC will be able to further benefit from customer feedback through their anecdotal information and personal experiences.

- MMS will partner with the WSSC to conduct eight (8) focus groups wherein we will speak to Residential and Commercial customers from both Prince George’s Counties.

- Suggested topics to address include:
  - The WSSC logo and other branding collateral – Via the focus groups we can test and discuss multiple concepts and ideas with customers to learn what most appeals to them and speaks to what the WSSC wants to project about themselves through their brand and logo.
  - Communications – Focus groups will allow us to ask customers to speak more in depth regarding what they want out of the WSSC website to make it an informative resource for them, as well as regarding other ways the WSSC can reach them and provide the most up-to-date information. This includes discussing the Customer Notification System specifically in order to learn how to better promote this service and garner more interest so it can become a useful tool for customers.
  - Infrastructure – Money is always a sensitive topic for people. Group discussions provide participants with a safe environment within which they can express their concerns while also working together as a team to develop sound and reasonable ideas that can work for all parties.
  - Image/Public Relations – There are several key areas wherein the WSSC’s image could use a bit of polish. During the focus groups we can discern the reasoning behind why people feel about the WSSC the way they do, from which we can develop action steps so that the WSSC can improve how they are viewed.

- The focus groups will take place at a facility located in a centralized location.

- Upon completion of the focus groups, MMS will review the discussions and provide the WSSC with written report.
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- Customer Service
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- Communications and Stakeholder Relationships
- Environmental Stewardship
Objective

WSSC wished to further probe the quantitative results of their recent customer satisfaction study by collecting first-hand, anecdotal insight and customer feedback about their strategic initiative concerns from their Commercial and Residential, water and/or sewer rate-paying customers.

Key areas discussed during the qualitative portion of the customer satisfaction research included:

- Customer Service – Problem resolution, knowledge and professionalism of phone and field agents, etc.
- Billing Rates – Satisfaction, value, comparison to other utilities.
- Communications – Outreach efforts, information dissemination, agency reputation, environmental activities.
- Level of Service – Responsive, expeditious, infrastructure needs, etc.
- Branding – The image the brand portrays.

Methodology

WSSC partnered with Maryland Marketing Source, Inc. (MMS), a full-service market research company, to facilitate the success of this two-part customer satisfaction research effort.

The first part of this research endeavor included a quantitative study wherein 1,200 telephone surveys were conducted among WSSC customers (1,000 surveys were conducted with WSSC Residential customers – 500 in Prince George’s County and 500 in Montgomery County; and 200 were conducted with WSSC Commercial customers – 100 in Prince George’s County and 100 in Montgomery County). The quantitative study provided WSSC with a clearer overall view of their strengths as well as their opportunities for positive change, which they were then able to flush out in more detail by engaging in qualitative research.

MMS worked with the WSSC to conduct eight (8) focus groups in total – six (6) with Residential customers and two (2) with Commercial customers, and four (4) each in Prince George’s and Montgomery County. The focus groups conducted with Prince George’s County residents took place at OMR in Greenbelt, Maryland and the focus groups conducted with Montgomery County residents took place at Shugoll Research in Bethesda, Maryland. Each group was approximately two (2) hours in length, Commercial customers received an honorarium of $175 in appreciation of their participation, and Residential customers received $100. The schedule was as follows:

**Prince George’s County (OMR in Greenbelt, MD)**
- Group 1 – 9/26/11 @ 3:00 PM: Commercial Group
- Group 2 – 9/26/11 @ 5:30 PM: Limited Income Residential
- Group 3 – 9/27/11 @ 5:30 PM: General Population Residential
- Group 4 – 9/27/11 @ 8:00 PM: General Population Residential

**Montgomery County (Shugoll Research in Bethesda, MD)**
- Group 5 – 10/4/11 @ 3:00 PM: Commercial Group
- Group 6 – 10/4/11 @ 5:30 PM: Limited Income Residential
- Group 7 – 10/5/11 @ 5:30 PM: General Population Residential
- Group 8 – 10/5/11 @ 8:00 PM: General Population Residential

Verbatim quotations from each focus group will be followed by one of the above group numbers as a reference guide.
Maryland Marketing Source, Inc., in cooperation with the WSSC, was responsible for:

- Developing the research plan and screening criteria;
- Writing the screener;
- Creating the discussion guides;
- Recruiting the focus group participants;
- Managing the project’s on-site execution;
- Moderating the focus groups; and
- Analyzing the results and writing a Topline (summary) Report.

Please note that focus group research is qualitative in nature and, therefore, cannot be projected to an entire customer base.
Key Highlights

Branding
- **Logo**
  - The WSSC logo is recognizable by Residential and Commercial customers.
  - The logo with just WSSC’s initials seems to be the one most preferred by focus group participants.
- **Taglines**
  - Overall reactions to the tagline concepts were quite mixed and no clear cut winners or losers stood out.
  - Focus group members made it quite clear that they prefer taglines that are:
    - Brief
    - Mention water
    - Focus on the customer, not the organization

Communications
- **Website**
  - Most Residential and Commercial customers are visiting the website because they are looking to pay their bill.
  - Residential customers also look to the website as a vehicle for learning about and reporting local issues.
  - Commercial customers want quick access to pertinent business information and don’t want to spend a lot of time looking for it or browsing through extraneous information.
  - Customers of both type and from both counties believe the website needs to be updated regarding:
    - Aesthetic appeal
    - Ease of navigation
    - Interactivity
- **CNS (Customer Notification System)**
  - Across the board, knowledge of the CNS was extremely limited.
  - Interest in receiving pertinent updates via the CNS was high.
  - Participants want the ability to access CNS alerts via every medium possible and to also be able to opt in and out of each medium whenever they like.
  - Robo-calls would also be acceptable to most customers as long as WSSC identified itself right away and immediately stated the reason.
- **Other Forms of Communication**
  - Overall, focus group participants feel that they have little reason to stay in continuous communication with WSSC via social media or smart phone applications.

Customer Service
- **Billing & Payment Options**
  - Residential customers state that they do not want to be billed monthly because:
    - They prefer to have as few monthly bills
    - Payment amounts are not worth monthly payments
    - The prefer to have extra time to budget for the cost
  - The only benefit to receiving a monthly bill is that customers would be alerted to any issues, such as leaks, prior to receiving an inflated bill.
  - Group members tend to pay their bills:
    - Online via their bank
    - By calling on the telephone,
    - By mailing in a check the traditional way.
• Paying online via WSSC’s website is not preferred because:
  ▪ The option is hard to locate on the website
  ▪ They don’t want to pay the processing fee
  ▪ They have concerns about security

• Service & Field Agents
  o Most of the focus group participants have had no reason to interact with the WSSC because they have experienced no issues or concerns.
  o Participants who did have to call into WSSC stated they did so regarding billing issues and payments most often.
  o Residential and Commercial customers in both counties complained about how long it takes to get through and speak to a person when calling the WSSC.
  o Upon reaching a Service Agent, group members agreed that often:
    ▪ Agents are polite and courteous
    ▪ Inquiries were often resolved during first contact
  o Customers from both counties have confidence in WSSC’s agents and their ability to provide assistance.
  o WSSC is deemed as better overall when compared to the service provided by other, local utilities, according Residential and Commercial customers in Prince George’s and Montgomery County. This is because customers:
    ▪ Have less service interruptions
    ▪ Are able to get in touch with WSSC when needed

Infrastructure
• Level of Service
  o Customers from both counties rated their infrastructure knowledge as low.
  o Customers from Montgomery County believe themselves to be a bit more informed than do customers in Prince George’s County.
  o Within the past five years, the average number of outages experienced by Residential customers is two.
  o Overall, many participants agreed that one outage every five years would be acceptable.
  o Several of the participants from both counties, however, work from home or are home during the day with their children and feel that they cannot accept any outages within a five year timeframe.
  o Members of both Limited Income groups, as well in one of the Prince George’s General Population groups, felt stronger than most that it is ‘Somewhat Important’ or ‘Very Important’ to decrease the average length of outages from their current levels of 4-6 hours.
  o Most of the focus group members also felt that it would be ‘Very Important’ to have a higher percentage of advance notification.
  o Residential and Commercial customers both believe that having two outages per year, with an average outage of 16 hours and advance notification 20% of the time is a ‘Great Inconvenience’.

• Pipeline Rehabilitation
  o Rehabilitation Investment
    ▪ Residential participants agreed that an extra $5 per bill to be invested in rehabilitation would be ‘No Hardship’.
    ▪ Paying an extra $10 per bill is felt to be at least ‘Some Hardship’ for Limited Income customers and a few General Population customers.
    ▪ Paying an extra $15 per bill is a ‘Great Hardship’ for most focus group participants.
    ▪ Commercial focus group participants are willing to pay an extra $15 per bill because it is quite a small sum compared to their average bills.
Residential customers are divided regarding whether it would be better if the WSSC set rates for five years at a time versus doing so annually as they do now.

Overall, customers were more interested in the WSSC being transparent in, and accountable for, what they do with the money than they were in how they do it.

Group members believe that, in order to understand the need to reinvest in the failing infrastructure, customers need to be provided with:

- Information about the work being done
- Financial statements
- Reports about past breaks
- The strategic plan

Group members further explained that they believe the WSSC should do this via every medium possible, including advertising on television and speaking with children in schools.

**Image**

- Going “green”
  - Residential customers are unsure about whether or not the WSSC puts forth effort to go green.
  - Commercial customers believe that the WSSC is not green because they have not yet begun to offer paperless billing.
  - Customers know very little about WSSC sponsored events within the community.

- Impression of WSSC
  - Overall, Residential and Commercial focus group participants expressed favorable opinions about the WSSC and they believe it is a good organization.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the WSSC is well known and well liked by its Residential and Commercial customers. WSSC is not as known to customers as are other local utilities, but that is, in part, what makes it better liked than them as well. Organizations such as Pepco, DirecTV, and Washington Gas are more visible because customers find themselves having to deal with them more often due to outages or other areas of concern. Customers also have more difficulty when doing so, they say, because of the other organizations’ poor customer service. WSSC has less frequent service interruptions and therefore are more ‘out of sight, out of mind’ which is how customers want their utilities to be. Further, should any issues arise, customers are confident that they will be able to contact the WSSC and get the help they need. Finally, although everyone wishes they could pay less for any service they receive, many customers agree that their WSSC bill is among the cheaper of the utility bills they have to pay each year.

Within the realm of what customers know about WSSC, they rate very highly. However, it is within the realm of the unknown, what customers don’t know about the WSSC – its financial structure, the services it offers, the history of the organization, its involvement in the community – that could benefit from some improvement. The qualitative research results lend themselves to the following recommendations:

**Branding**

Customers who are already familiar with WSSC prefer a logo that is brief and relevant. These are the customers who most prefer a logo that features only the organization’s initials. That being said, however, even with the full name written out, it is not altogether clear to residents, those well settled and the newly arrived alike, what it is exactly that the organization provides. If the WSSC wants to become more recognizable as well as memorable, it would be in their best interest to make the ‘water drop’ image in their logo more clearly defined. Some suggestions for revising the ‘water drop’ include:

- Solidifying the water drop.
- Including a series of three, small, off center, falling water drops (i.e. \(\bigcirc\) ).
- Displaying parts of the life cycle of the water drop, from rain, to the Potomac, to WSSC, to homes and businesses, back to WSSC, back to the Potomac, back to the atmosphere.

In general, people are sensitive about the utility services they receive, who is responsible, and who it belongs to. Focus group participants made it quite clear that they believed the water belonged to them, to everyone; however they didn’t all feel equally responsible for the integrity and quality of the community’s water. The WSSC should consider being sensitive to this as it develops a tagline that:

- Is inclusive of the services it provides.
- Focuses on the community, not the organization.
- Avoids controversial imagery such as aquatic life and conservation.
- Is four words or less.

**Communications**

Overall, WSSC customers are highly uninformed about the WSSC. When attempting to find out information via the WSSC website, for example, customers are either deterred by the layout of the site or by their inability to easily navigate the site to find what they need. It is recommended that the WSSC revamp the website so that:

- More frequently clicked links such as bill pay, account information, WSSC contact information, service updates etc. are available directly from the homepage.
- The color scheme is complimentary and consistent on each page.
- The navigation bar contains succinct tabs and sub-tabs so as to not overwhelm visitors who are doing research via the website.
- Customers are able to interact with the site, using it as a tool for reporting issues, receiving updates specific to their zip code or neighborhood, download necessary documents, etc.
Further, WSSC may also want to investigate new and innovated ways to increase their ability for self promotion. It became clear during the focus groups that the WSSC offers many useful services, such as the CNS, and is highly involved in the community and yet no one knew much about it. There are many free and paid resources available to the WSSC that would make information dissemination more far-reaching, including:

- Providing press releases to the local news media.
- Including information with the bill, not only via inserts, but directly on the bill itself.
- Providing field personnel with pamphlets to hand out to customers who approach them.
- Paying for radio and television spots.
- Email blasts.

**Customer Service**

Residential customers do not want to be billed monthly. It would be costly to them – extra account maintenance and Chesapeake Bay Fund fee payments, extra stamps or online fee costs, and the extra time paying another monthly bill – and they fear how the costs of the extra mailings will trickle down onto them as well. If possible, the WSSC should refrain from transitioning to monthly billing because it would be costly to do so and it is not something customers want.

Customers do, however, want the ability to keep track of their usage. This provides the WSSC with a key opportunity to introduce smart metering options. Smart meters would provide customers and the WSSC with the ability to receive accurate, real time usage data and to respond accordingly, thereby reducing costs and possibly increasing customer conservation awareness and behavior.

Further, should WSSC move forward with billing Residential customers on a monthly basis, it would be beneficial to give customers notification of the change well in advance, and be prepared for the customers to communicate their feelings on the matter. WSSC should also consider rolling out paperless billing, auto debit payments, and allowing customers to pay their bill via their website for free so that customers can keep up with their payments and not incur any additional burden.

With regard to service & field agents, focus group participants are generally very happy with the overall service they’ve received. The most repeated complaint has to do with the time it takes to reach a live person because hold and wait times are incredibly long. This is highly important to both Residential and Commercial customers and the improvement of this system would well ingratiate the WSSC with its consumer base.

**Infrastructure**

Overall awareness about local water and sewer infrastructure is low among customers. Commercial customers seem to be more aware of failing system than are Residential customers. WSSC customers are hesitant to agree to contribute to repairing the infrastructure, not only because no one wants to pay more money than they feel they need to these days, but also because they’ve seen little sign of the need. Their poor awareness of the aging infrastructure and balk at investing in its repair ironically stem from the fact that many customers have never experienced any water or sewer disruptions and therefore they don’t see any problems that need to be fixed. It is hard for customers to comprehend fixing what they have never experienced breaking before.
WSSC can look to fill this information gap by providing customers with as much easily understood information about the history of the pipelines, what causes pipes to breakdown, and the advantages of replacing trouble spots ahead of time versus having to make costly repairs after the fact. Just by raising their awareness levels in the focus groups, participants found themselves more willing to invest in rehabilitating the infrastructure, both with their time and money, stating that:

- Paying more in order to prevent or quickly repair any damaged pipes is more preferable than dealing with additional disruption due to large-scale breaks.
- They would be willing to pay $5 extra per quarterly bill.
- Periodic outages would be tolerated so long as advanced notification is provided and the length of the outage is kept minimal.
- Receiving notification in advance of an outage is more important than decreasing the duration of the outage.

Customers also want to be kept abreast of the WSSC’s plans by having access to:

- Work schedules
- Budgeting and financial statements
- Progress updates

**Image**

The WSSC currently enjoys a favorable position among its customers, especially when compared to other local utilities. However, with the impending rehabilitation of the infrastructure and the potential for service interruptions and increased prices, the WSSC will be more in the public’s eye and not necessarily in the best public light. To continue within the positive view that many have of organization, WSSC may wish to consider avenues for making their customers’ lives more convenient and less disrupted by the upcoming changes. Some examples include:

- Paperless billing.
- Providing water in bulk to communities scheduled for rehabilitation.
- Keeping customers informed with as much updated information as possible.

Further, these efforts will help the WSSC prove its commitment to protecting the environment as well as their goal of providing customers with high quality service, and water that is clean and safe for all.