

Lyonnaise des Eaux A participatory approach to restore trust

“New ideas on water” is the participative approach applied by La Lyonnaise des Eaux, in particular on the Internet, in order to restore stakeholders’ trust.

La Lyonnaise des Eaux (Suez Environnement subsidiary, environment branch of GDF Suez Group, is submitted to a growing public’s distrust. Private management of public commodities is indeed controversial. In France, suspicion comes from corruption of political decision-makers since the 1990’s. More generally, water resources’ depletion, recognized as a ‘fundamental right’¹, brings up the problem of its governance.

In this regard, despite several important failures regarding municipalisation of water supply (in Alger and Mexico for instance) or 6th World Water Forum recommendations for public-private Partnership, NGOs and anti-globalization organizations are beginning to take action around the world, towards an exclusively public management. To do so, those organizations resort to aggressive action campaign directed at private water operators. For instance, in 2005, a one day campaign, “Stop Suez”², had been organized by the ACME network and the associations *France Liberté* and *Public Citizen*. Their messages, broadcasted across all media and social networks, had found a great audience among the public.

As a result, in France, a political leader eager to please citizens, became more and more demanding towards private operators. This was done in such a way that, according to Jean-Louis Chaussade, Suez Environnement Director, “the idea of winning a public contact would last for life, is totally invalid”³. Because of this, La Lyonnaise des Eaux is now submitted to fierce competition from its private competitors as well as the public ones. In France, 67 local municipalities had opted for a public management between 2004 and 2008 as compared to 8 before, among them, Grenoble and Paris. Bordeaux and Lyon could be the next cities choosing municipalisation.

Moreover, according to H el ene Valade, Director of the Sustainable Environment department of La Lyonnaise des Eaux, internal employees, being exposed to those evolutions, expressed “their wish of finding sense in their work, wishing to be part of something wider than the purely economic level and contributing to general interest through water resource preservation”⁴.

In order to be heard, to assert its expertise and to position itself as a legitimate operator in sustainable development within its company and regarding water governance, La Lyonnaise des Eaux has implemented, since 2009, its plan “New Ideas on Water”. This

plan has been achieved through a participative approach, including and incorporating the company's stakeholders.

“New Ideas on Water”: opening a dialogue

Since 2006, La Lyonnaise des Eaux has searched for ways to create a “new model” for its water treatment and potable water management activities. To achieve this, they do not want to perform this “transformation alone” but to co-construct the project⁵ with the stakeholders, in order to assure its legitimacy. This initiative had been developed through the plan “New Ideas on Water”.

Internal mobilization

From the setting of such an approach in the company's sustainable environment priorities, a consequently internal mobilization has been developed. Thus, from 2008, La Lyonnaise des Eaux has started a more decentralized territorial reorganisation. Following this, in 2009, 600 meetings were then set up “in order to make every employee aware of water issues in France”. Moreover, they have been asked to “achieve a concrete gesture for the problem” (carbon footprint, botanical gardens, promotion of water fountains...).

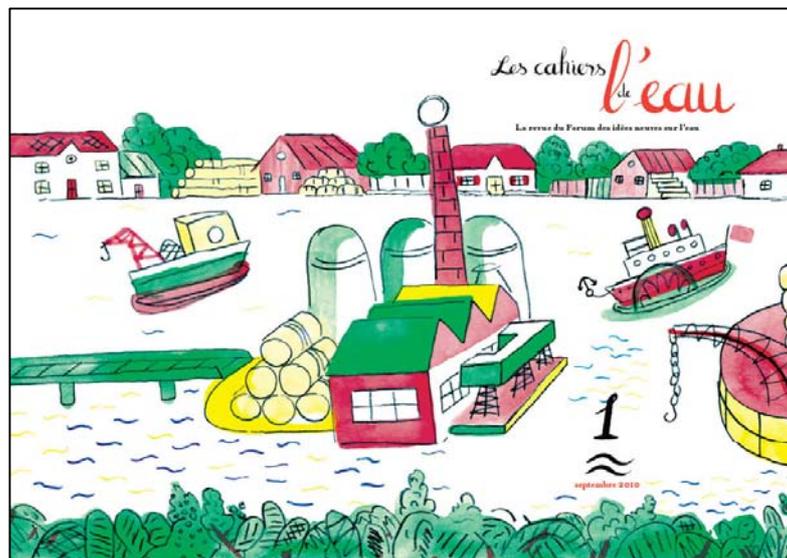
In a listening approach conducted by H  l  ne Valade, Director for Sustainable Environment, it was stated that as soon as the internal reserves were dispelled, “all the relays, included the hostile ones” were detected, and “a list made in order to interview them”⁶. In order to achieve this, several groups of operators were gathered together by main groups: civil society (non profitable organizations, scientists, experts...), customers (political decision makers) and potential economic partners (farmers and manufacturers). Based on the mapping of those involved and as part of the program “New Ideas on Water”, several tools have been created, in order to collect all concerned stakeholders' contributions, including those from the company's detractors.

“Forum of New Ideas on Water”

Two successive sessions of the “Forum of New Ideas on Water” occurred, gathering economists, experts, environment specialists, intellectuals and people in charge of non-profitable organizations. Taking place from February to June 2010, the first session's topic, directed by Eric Orsenna, was “Water value and prices, an economic model and a governance to be reinvented”. The member of the French Academy has been chosen to conduct the forum to make sure that the subject is being broached broadly and legitimately, as he published a book on the future of water “L'Avenir de l'Eau” (Fayard, 2008). People who took part in the Forum met once a week for two months. Luc Ferry directed the second session, taking place from October to February 2010, with the topic being “Water, Sciences and Technologies, Innovation at the service of a sustainable water management”.

Based on those works, the company came up with a “clear diagnosis” on “the necessity of a better shared governance between private companies, civil society and local

authorities". "Les Cahiers de l'eau" (Water Notebooks), a dialectical overview of exchanges and interviews from the Forum, highlighted each session's results.



Moreover, in order to disclose those initiatives to the public, the company communicated those results via methods including handing out brochures in train stations, as well as a benchmark and a viral marketing strategy. Although at the same time, only a few press releases had been made. According to H el ene Valade, "the concern was that this approach wasn't advertised and Eric Orsenna's Presidency been spun"⁷.

In that logic of communication towards a large public, actions, implemented by the company, have been carried out towards followed bloggers in health and environment fields. These people have been invited to discuss these actions, during meetings in Parisian caf es, notably with Isabelle Kocher, Genegal manager of La Lyonnaise des Eaux and Eric Orsenna. Some of the bloggers have posted their heterogeneous impressions:

- Two blogs of professionals, "Graine de S esame", *Sesame seed* (blog of a strategic and sustainable development consulting agency) and Econov' (experts in technologies and energy efficiency solutions), shared those initiatives in an instructive and quite positive way. Indeed, Graine de S esame explained in a post how "La Lyonnaise des Eaux launched an call for new ideas on water"⁸ and granted an interview on sustainable development to H el ene Valade in two steps⁹. Econov', as for it, declared when the Forums ended that he will "constantly provide its support for the debate and will be part of it, bringing ideas and exclusive interviews to water management operators"¹⁰.
- Three other professional blogs (Cdurable.info, the Blog of Sustainable marketing and les 4 El ements), which were there to one of La Lyonnaise des Eaux meeting, haven't published anything online on the topic.
- One political blogger, Pierre Parillo, a "right-wing reviewer and columnist" interested by the environment, shared his pleasant surprise and gratefulness to the meetings organizers. Thinking at first he had to deal with a "probably left-wing political group or association", he drew up a rather positive report of an evening where he had coped with "a member of the French Academy and the manager of a company, almost leader as regards water supply, at least in France"¹¹.

- Alain Gély, geologist, eco-engineering sole trader and host of the blog “Ecodouble”¹², shared his experience in two steps in long articles. In his first post “where there is life there is hope”, published the 5th of February 2011, he tells in detail the story of his journey in Paris on the 7th of June 2010, where he met “Madame Kocher” and “Monsieur Orsenna”, then sharing his open letter addressed to La Lyonnaise des Eaux’s manager. In this document, he recognised “her courage to invite them to debate”. According to Alain Gély, “doing it, was to admit that you were aware that you were up against a wall as any of orthodox economists methods wouldn’t give any solutions”. He then offered “eco-engineering” trails and said he was convinced that it was because she was a “female-leader” that she had the courage, the cleverness and the common sense to look for other thriven ideas elsewhere”. In a second article¹³, he shared his disillusionment towards a mail from La Lyonnaise des Eaux Public Relations Department, in response to his letter. He had just been sent back to the online “New Ideas on Water” platform, to discuss about his trails. Therefore, for lack of having an appropriate answer from Isabelle Kocher to his practical proposals, he concluded that “New Ideas on Water, it’s a try-on! And that’s for sure now! La Lyonnaise des Eaux is the champion of Green Washing!”

The Web 2.0 “New Ideas on Water” platform

Looking beyond followed bloggers in order to directly reach a large audience online, the Web 2.0 “New Ideas on Water” platform, launched in February 2010, offers Internet users a creative and collective platform to brainstorm, whether they are consumers, or non-profit organisations”¹⁴. The aim is to collect proposals on “how to preserve water resource”¹⁵.

« Idées neuves sur l'eau », Platform homepage

In April 2011, 350 ideas from the Internet users had been collected, with 104 240 one-time visitors and 513 registered members in “New Ideas on Water” platform, including 184 active contributors to the debate. Regarding these contributions, “we were afraid of users’ criticisms, that they would go out of their way on this platform, H el ene Valade explains. Yet, they’ve been very practical, based on water issues in homes ”¹⁶.

Among those proposed ideas, 7 have been rewarded¹⁷ during a night event, in the presence of Erik Orsenna and Luc Ferry.

The 7 “New Ideas on Water”, come from the web, rewarded by La Lyonnaise des Eaux

The most technological (*Thomas Dreidemy – Student at ENGESS*) – Oxidise endocrinal disruptive found in water, before their rejection in natural environment.

The most Sustainable Development (*Jean-Louis Janin*) – Set up water resources indicators, including one examining overexploitation, and better inform the public on added data concerning water.

The most social (*Djang’eau*) – On a water price progressiveness principle.

The most logical (*a contributor to the “Bar of water” event, during Solidays Festival*) – Stop wasting drinking water on public highways.

The most “nature” focused (*Micka el Freudenreich*) - Student at ENGESS) – Create a bonus system in order to improve aquatic ecosystems.

The most poetic (*a contributor to the “Bar of water” event, during Solidays Festival*) –save dew for our consumption and farming watering.

The most community oriented (*Bertrand Hartmann*) – Enrich the debate on water, connecting citizens and service operators.

Finally, during 2010, the Web 2.0 Platform “New Ideas on Water” was also made available on the company’s Intranet. With 600 members registered and a hundred proposed ideas, the company’s workers contributed in a considerable manner to the company’s action.

Forum in Regions

A tour in 15 Regions had been organised in order to collect local political leaders’ opinion on ideas and lines of thoughts put forward during the Forum. Those local meetings were conducted by Isabelle Kocher, “La Lyonnaise des Eaux”’s General Manager and Erik Orsenna as well as regional companies’ managers.

Those Forums in Regions enabled a dialogue between “La Lyonnaise des Eaux” main stakeholders and were good moments of open discussion, in particular for political leaders¹⁸.

Thus, through this internal mobilisation and several tools, La Lyonnaise des Eaux has been able to:

- To legitimately take over “New Ideas” formulated by independent authorities (intellectuals, economists, people in charge of non-profitable organizations) during the Forum;

- To promote a principle of opening and transparency towards final consumers, who are free to participate to the debate through the participative platform;
- To collect and include their main stakeholders and political leaders' responses during local meetings.

Relations with the stakeholders after the dialogue's opening

A new positioning in the service of a dialogue with local governments: the "Water's Health Pact"

The dialogue, initiated with "New Ideas on Water", active until spring 2011, led to a new positioning of La "Lyonnaise des Eaux", in particular towards its customers, the local governments, with the "Water's Health Pact".

It's a concept that have to be used as a framework for water operators and that includes "new propositions as regards governance, technological innovations and economic models". Words used in the marketing campaign focused on the fact that this pact was based on the shared assessment that "easy water had become fragile" or that "man has always needed water, but now it's the water that needs man".



In order to make it known, starting from November 2011, a dedicated website, <http://www.contratpourlasantedeleau.fr> has been published online. It comprises around thirty videos, local leaders', non-profit organisations or stakeholders' testimonies about the approach. It also includes forms and pedagogic animations. Besides this, the "Water's Health Pact" has also been released through a marketing campaign across the media (daily national and regional newspapers).

During the following weeks, the concept has been transposed in the field. As part of the contracts signed between La Lyonnaise des Eaux and cities of Dijon, Tarbes and Laon, some of the propositions have been taken over. For instance, a "water local governance charter" has been signed, reinforcing "local governments control means, a transparent and simplified

access to contracts data, water efficiency promotion and a better information towards the inhabitants"¹⁹.

"New Ideas on Water" online discussion interrupted

The 7 rewarded Internet users' contributions on "New Ideas on Water" "have been examined in order to be put into practice", H el ene Valade asserted in December 2011. She added that "three of them were seriously being considered" and "that their authors

were regularly kept informed of advances". So those three contributors are lucky enough to be able to continue the discussion with the company.

On the other hand, for hundreds of active contributors, like the blogger Alain Gély (see above), it looks like La Lyonnaise des Eaux didn't find any solution to carry on the dialogue that had begun, in the same way. In fact, in November 2011, JeeMeo²⁰ (Social CRM software publisher) announced having been chosen by La Lyonnaise des Eaux, that "wished it would extend its citizen dialogue initiative on the Internet". The supplier explained that the goal was similar to the "New Ideas on Water" platform one: "to collect customers' opinion on water, its use and how to preserve this resource at best". Also, according to JeeMeo's press release, they had planned to extend, over time, this dialogue to other communities like the "water testers", volunteer customers who, after being informed, regularly send him their observation of the taste they perceived".

As actions towards the "water testers" do exist, and their promotion have been done, in particular through a video²¹ published on "Water's Health Pact" website, no new online contributions on the topic has been noticed since 2011. Regarding opinions gathering in general, JeeMeo, in November 2011, developed "a quick solution with added value": to transfer the "New Ideas on Water" debate from the platform to a dedicated Fan page on Facebook. On this page, a tab "your ideas" should be used for gathering and comparing Internet users' opinions on the subject".

In June 2013, this Fan Page on Facebook wasn't online anymore and the initiative "New Ideas on Water" was only to be seen on one of La Lyonnaise des Eaux official website's page²², that put forwards a summary of main initiative contributions. Regarding Internet users' contributions, only one insert mentions what has been done and now sends us to the Facebook page, as the Fan page didn't exist anymore.

According to H el ene Valade, "the intentions were clear" as the Platform was a short-term initiative. According to her, "the main objective was to present results". She added that the dialogue with the public goes on in a different way, via direct exchanges on social networks for instance.

Conclusion

Thus, it seems that La Lyonnaise des Eaux, after having greatly succeeded in mobilising its employees internally and in committing to an "open to all" approach, in order to reposition its identity and its image, finally focused on its stakeholders: local governments and its customers.

To focus again on customers is natural and more flourishing for the company's activity, that takes profit from the started process and that adds further differentiating factors from the competition.

Nevertheless, such an evolution involves risks. Indeed, as we noticed with the blogger Alain G ely, the lack of commensurate feedbacks according to aroused expectations and interrupting the dialogue are likely to provoke distrust towards an approach that was meant to be honest.



This case study is extracted from a Spin Partners report “To deploy an efficient and adapted online strategy of influence” published by Les Echos Etudes in October 2013.

In order to rethink its strategy of influence in this complex digital environment, this report presents the following elements:

- *To know how to use online methods and communication of influence tools in order to deploy a perennial and efficient strategy*
- *To efficiently respond to its image and reputation damages*
- *To be lastingly recognized as a legitimate and credible operator for economic, institutional and community stakeholders*
- *To draw lessons from best strategies of influence practices implemented by companies and organisations*

Analysing companies or organisations’ strategies case studies (RTE, Leclerc, Fedex, Lyonnaise des Eaux, Microsoft, Alcen, Expanscience, “Les Pigeons”...), the report shows how to built an efficient and adapted strategy of influence.

To go further and order the report: <http://www.lesechos-etudes.fr/>

Notes

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- (2) http://www.acme-eau.org/Communique-de-presse-Public-Citizen-ACME-France-Libertes-Amis-de-la-Terre_a204.html
- (3) <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conso/2012/03/21/05007-20120321ARTFIG00631-la-competition-se-durcit-pour-veolia-et-suez.php> , Le Figaro, La compétition se durcit pour Veolia et Suez, 21 mars 2013
- (4) <http://www.laposte.fr/lehub/La-synthese-de-l-Atelier,1733>
- (5) <http://www.laposte.fr/lehub/La-synthese-de-l-Atelier,1733>
- (6) http://www.cddd.fr/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/111223_Petit-d%C3%A9j_carto_partie_prenantes_9d%C3%A9c2011.pdf
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- (8) <http://www.graine-de-sesame.net/?p=1663>
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- (11) <http://pierre.parrillo.over-blog.fr/article-idees-neuves-sur-l-eau-51845723.html> and <http://pierre.parrillo.over-blog.fr/article-idees-neuves-sur-l-eau-2-2-54624430.html>
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- (16) <http://www.laposte.fr/lehub/La-synthese-de-l-Atelier,1733>
- (17) <http://www.lyonnaise-des-eaux.fr/sites/default/files/presse/Trophees%20Idees%20Neuves%20sur%20lEau.pdf>
- (18) <http://www.laposte.fr/lehub/La-synthese-de-l-Atelier,1733>
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- (21) http://www.contratpourlasantedeleau.fr/videos/A6_ROLLIN_GERARD.mp4
- (22) <http://www.lyonnaise-des-eaux.fr/tendances-et-opinions/idees-neuves-sur-leau>