


What Every Operator Needs to Know About Giving Public Tours

Shea Dunifon and Cody Diehl

Knowledge	Principles	Practical Considerations
What is a public tour?	A public tour is an opportunity for utilities to allow non-employees to learn about and view water and/or wastewater infrastructure.	Special consideration must be taken with facilities under construction. Not every facility is suitable for giving tours. You need to consider accessibility by people with disabilities.
Who is the public?	The public is defined as the general population or community members and leaders.	The public may include families and individuals, school groups, business owners, stakeholders, community leaders, and government officials.
Where are public tours conducted?	Utilities often conduct tours of their treatment facilities or associated properties.	Facilities often include water and wastewater treatment facilities, biosolids facilities, laboratories, and other owned properties such as wetlands.
Why give public tours?	Public tours can influence public opinion and generate awareness of unnoticed infrastructure, careers, and more.	This outreach benefits facilities by increasing the support of the media, elected officials, and environmental groups. These groups can be very influential in their communities. Public tours also introduce or reinforce participants' knowledge of the natural environment, the need to protect it, and the various careers that make this possible, including facility operators.
When is the best time to give tours?	Depending upon the resources available, tours may be seasonal, recurring, or coincide with other events or times — holidays, festivals, open houses, and so on. This is subject to when is best for the facility.	Considerations must be taken to ensure tour participants are safe. Therefore, outdoor tours should be given only when weather permits. If tours are held on a regular and recurring schedule, considerations must be made to ensure adequate staff is available to maintain normal facility operations.
How long should a public tour take?	This will vary depending upon the needs of the facility. Some factors include staffing, size of tour group, age of participants (for instance, young children have short attention spans), and size of the facility.	We recommend tours be between 60 and 90 minutes. Larger facilities may need 90 minutes, to include time for participants to ask questions, wash hands after tour, etc.
What size should a public tour be?	This also depends upon the needs of the facility. Smaller facilities with fewer staff might choose to lead smaller tours, whereas larger facilities with more staff might choose to lead larger tour groups.	Facilities only should allow tour sizes they are comfortable hosting. We recommend a maximum ratio of one staff member to 10 tour participants. School staff, teachers, and chaperones may be substituted for facility staff when giving tours to school groups, but the ratio of adults to students is still recommended as a maximum of 1:10. Giving tours to small public groups (less than five participants) may not be advantageous when short-staffed. Some facilities require a minimum number of tour participants to avoid getting inundated with one-, two-, or three-person requests. There are exceptions, such as when an elected official requests a private tour.

Knowledge	Principles	Practical Considerations
<p>What kinds of safety considerations must be taken?</p>	<p>Ensuring tour participants are safe at all times is paramount.</p>	<p>Insist that tour participants wear closed-toe shoes (no sandals or heels), dress appropriately for the weather (if outdoors), and bring bottled water or a refillable container.</p> <p>A quick headcount at the beginning and end of the tour can verify all tour participants have left the facility.</p> <p>Always ensure participants have access to soap and water and/or hand sanitizer for hand cleansing. The tour route should be checked to ensure proper signage on nonpotable hose bibbs, sinks, etc.</p> <p>Consult an employer-led risk and/or safety resource to ensure tour paths are safe and there are plans for emergencies — including evacuation plans — and ask if there is any paperwork involved with allowing participants onsite. Additionally, personal protective equipment such as hard hats, vests, hearing protection, and safety glasses may be needed for all participants.</p> <p>Consult with your facility manager(s) for recommendations.</p> <p>Tour guides should always carry a cell phone in case they need to dial 911. Facility-issued radios also are useful for quick communications internally but should not be carried in lieu of a cell phone.</p>
<p>What kinds of special safety concerns must be taken if minors (anyone under 18 years of age) are present?</p>	<p>Minors must be protected, not only physically but also with regard to their identities.</p>	<p>Photographs of minors must be approved by school staff if on a school field trip and by the students’ parents or guardians. Before taking photographs, always confirm that the teacher has media and photo release forms for all students.</p> <p>Before posting photographs or sharing with others, always consult the school staff. Students and their parents or guardians must be aware of the intended use of the photo. This is to protect the identity of minors.</p> <p>Prior to arriving onsite, tour guides should confirm there are enough chaperones in attendance. The role of teachers, school staff, and chaperones is to correct students’ behaviors. It is not the role of the tour guide to discipline students.</p>
<p>What are the perceived security risks associated with giving public tours?</p>	<p>Bringing individuals onsite can increase security concerns. Tour guides and employees must be vigilant and act in accordance with employer protocols if they notice suspicious behavior.</p>	<p>Avoid identifying or pointing out sensitive infrastructure such as chemical storage areas during tours. If possible, avoid walking tours past building signs that identify such infrastructure.</p> <p>Ask participants not to take photos or video in sensitive areas such as the control room, near SCADA screens, or chemical storage areas.</p> <p>If tour participants are not following tour directions — taking photos or videos when asked not to or asking questions that make you feel uncomfortable — you may end the tour prematurely. You may also try answering questions with, “I’m sorry. I can’t answer that, as it’s a matter of security.”</p>
<p>How does a tour guide know if their tour participants understand the information presented?</p>	<p>A quick survey at the beginning of the tour can help assess the audience, explaining industry terms and acronyms.</p>	<p>Throughout the tour, the guide should ask questions, discern body language, and not be afraid to adapt to re-engage participants by changing tone or using humor appropriately.</p>

Knowledge	Principles	Practical Considerations
What kinds of materials and resources can one use to improve their tours?	Tours following treatment processes can be very technical and long. Using printed materials such as diagrams, tour books, and one-page information sheets can help participants follow along and revisit information later.	<p>Brochures, a simple facility diagram, a simplified flow chart showing major processes, a list of common acronyms and their definitions, and a list of common questions and answers make for great take-home items.</p> <p>Many facilities offer presentations, videos, and demonstrations as introductions. These materials should preferably be available online or by request for participants to reference at a later date.</p> <p>To overcome loud noises and accommodate those with hearing impairments, use a device such as a megaphone, voice amplifier, or portable microphone with speaker. Avoid covering your face and mouth as some participants may read lips.</p>
How can one become better at giving public tours?	Practicing giving tours is one of the most effective ways to become comfortable and confident. Utilize new personnel as test participants and have them provide feedback on the information as part of their training.	<p>Public speaking is not always easy or natural. Giving tours to small groups and progressing to larger ones helps build confidence.</p> <p>Developing a script also is effective for keeping tours on time and on point. After conducting a few tours, you will develop a set of recurring messages or information.</p>
What kinds of skills are needed to give effective public tours?	To give effective public tours, tour guides must demonstrate such skills as communication, confidence, and adaptability.	<p>Communication is essential for describing a treatment process or the stages in a facility.</p> <p>Confidence allows the tour guide to speak with knowledge and builds trust with the tour participants.</p> <p>Adaptability is key when unique situations arise and tours are either redirected by construction or physical barriers.</p> <p>A working but presentable appearance is also required when interacting with the public. Consider changing into a clean, branded shirt or jacket with the employer's logo. If possible, wear a name tag to create a more personalized touch.</p>
How can one give a tour without being "too technical"?	Practice explaining the facility to your friends, family, children, or significant other.	<p>Avoid jargon. Use everyday language. Avoid acronyms. For example, using the term "bugs" and calling the facility "a plant" might confuse participants with their literal meanings. If you must use a technical term, define it clearly.</p> <p>Simplify tours and stick to the big-picture concepts. Going into too much detail on processes may overwhelm participants or lose their attention.</p>
What other benefits can facility tours offer the host?	Aside from helping to shape public perception, tours also influence employee morale and improve pride in the work environment.	<p>Employees may find they enjoy sharing knowledge and influencing the public. Keeping the facility clean and organized also will help employees feel a sense of pride in their work environment and encourage them to keep things looking neat for guests. Employee morale also may increase because participants may often say thank you, write thank you notes, or pay compliments.</p> <p>Aside from being educational, tours can be motivational. Tour guides can empower participants to be better stewards of the environment by conserving water, not flushing the wrong things, and promoting water careers. </p>

Shea Dunifon is Education Coordinator for Pinellas County Utilities in St. Petersburg, Florida. She is the current chair of the WEF Public Communication and Outreach Committee. Cody Diehl is a licensed wastewater treatment operator based in Polk County, Florida, and a member of the Operations Challenge team, the Polk County Bio-Wizards.