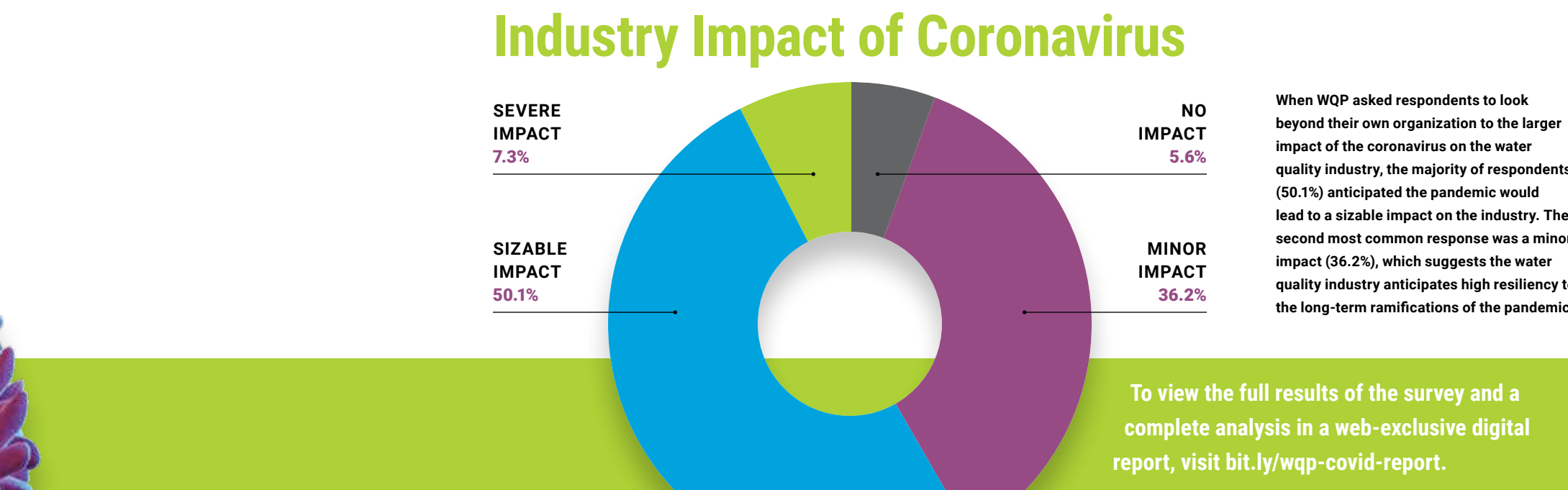




Navigating a New Normal

Water industry reacts to COVID-19 pandemic

By Lauren Del Ciello



When WQP asked respondents to look beyond their own organization to the larger impact of the coronavirus on the water quality industry, the majority of respondents (50.1%) anticipated the pandemic would lead to a sizable impact on the industry. The second most common response was a minor impact (36.2%), which suggests the water quality industry anticipates high resiliency to the long-term ramifications of the pandemic.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, a pandemic. Following continuous advocacy efforts by industry groups, the water industry was declared essential personnel and businesses were permitted to remain in operation during shelter-in-place orders across the U.S. However, the business landscape of the next few months, and indeed possibly the next few years, remains uncharted territory. The impacts of the pandemic can be felt throughout the water industry, as industry events are canceled and businesses are learning how to operate under a new normal. Virtual communication—ranging from networking to virtual sales visits—is on the rise. Additionally, businesses are taking steps to ensure both employee and customer safety remains the number one priority.

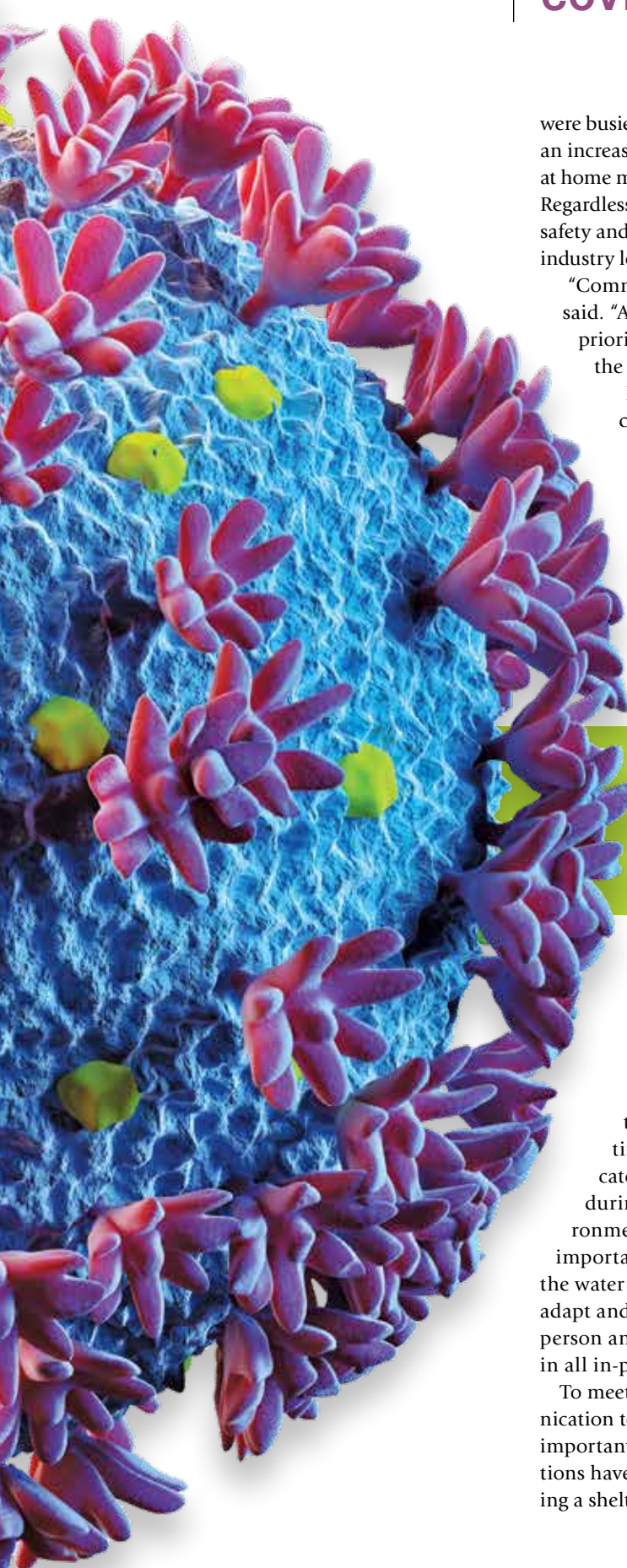
Industry Impacts of COVID-19
As the situation continued to develop, the WQP editorial team realized that now

more than ever communication and safety are absolutely vital to the continued growth of the water industry. In an effort to increase communication, develop resources and provide actionable information to its readers, the team surveyed WQP readers on the pandemic's impacts and also reached out to industry leaders to gather insights from the field. From March 20 to April 29, 2020, WQP surveyed its audience on the projected impacts of COVID-19 on both its audience and the industry at large. While opinions shifted from the early days of the pandemic to late April when shelter-in-place orders were in full-effect in many states, the majority of survey respondents (50.1%) agreed COVID-19 would have a sizable impact on the residential and commercial water quality industry. Many respondents (7.3%) even anticipated a severe impact. The survey also found that workflow and staffing and scheduling were some of the largest concerns WQP readers had associated with the pandemic, while supply and demand was an increasing concern in April and likely beyond. To view the full results of the survey and a complete analysis in a

web-exclusive digital report, visit bit.ly/wqp-covid-report.

Industry Leaders Emphasize Safety & Communication
Different facets of the water industry ranging from groundwater to plumbing to residential/commercial water treatment have faced business challenges posed by COVID-19 differently. Regardless, industry leaders WQP surveyed across the sector agreed the water industry's designation as essential bodes well for the future of water investment. "This pandemic does present a whole new set of challenges but as long as there is a demand for water, our services will be needed...even in dire situations," National Groundwater Association (NGWA) President Merritt Partridge told WQP. "We should be grateful for that." The other vital element they agreed on was the absolute necessity of prioritizing safety both for employees and customers during this challenging time. NGWA published a Contractor COVID-19 Checklist: Steps to Stay Safe to help guide its members in safe practices. Likewise, Plumbing Manufacturers International (PMI)

developed a coronavirus resource page for members, in addition to continuous efforts to ensure state and federal legislators continue to support the water industry throughout the pandemic. Additionally, the Water Quality Association (WQA) developed a coronavirus resource webpage, a coronavirus checklist, sample letters for customers, tips of the day and more to support members. It is important to note that the above addresses a few of the many resources and advocacy efforts these industry groups have undertaken throughout the pandemic and beyond to support their members and the industry at large. "The biggest points: Follow the local ordinances and guidelines, both state and local; follow the CDC guidelines on social distancing; and wash your hands and use protective gear if you need to," WQA Global Government Affairs Director David Loveday told WQP. While each state has reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic differently, Loveday—who worked in partnership with state and local governments to ensure WQA members were designated essential personnel during shelter-in-place orders—urged all businesses to follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for workplace safety. He also noted that many members



were busier than ever during the pandemic, as an increased number of consumers sheltering at home may have led to increased demand. Regardless, he reiterated the importance of safety and communication, a sentiment other industry leaders WQP surveyed echoed.

“Communication is critical,” Partridge said. “Asking questions emphasizes your priority to not only your safety but also the safety of your customers.”

Partridge recommended asking customers key questions prior to performing work, such as if any in the home have traveled extensively recently or if any in the home are ill. Yet, communication during a pandemic or a temporary “new normal” may not be as straightforward as previous customer, or even employee, communication prior.

“Communication is critical. Asking questions emphasizes your priority to not only your safety but also the safety of your customers.” ~NGWA President Merritt Partridge

How to Survive in a Virtual World: The Human Element

As circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic continued (and continues, as of press time) to unfold, how to communicate with customers and employees during an increasingly remote environment has become an increasingly important question. Many businesses in the water industry have faced the need to adapt and strike a new balance between in-person and remote work, prioritizing safety in all in-person interactions.

To meet this new need, virtual communication tools have become increasingly important. Even virtual sales demonstrations have begun to play a role in navigating a shelter-in-place world. Dealers have

innovated and devised new ways to reduce contact in picking up water samples or dropping off bottled water and salt deliveries, as well as maximizing safety while in customer’s homes through increased use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Greg Reyneke, managing director for Red Fox Advisors, current president for the Pacific WQA (PWQA) and current WQA board member, said those who look for opportunities are able to find them and even thrive during a virtual sales environment.

“I’m seeing this all over the country, east coast to west coast, the dealers that want to succeed are succeeding because they’re adapting to the changing environment,” Reyneke said in a video call with WQP. “Virtual sales conferences—that’s the new normal. Contactless sales appointments—that’s the new normal. More e-transactions—that’s the new normal,” he continued.

While some of these trends toward increasingly virtual interactions may have been a part of a pre-COVID-19 world, they are now an integral part of the workplace and business interactions. Regarding the human element of business during the pandemic, Reyneke stressed that all businesses stand on a three-legged stool of “people, products and process,” with an emphasis on people first and foremost.

“Hopefully, COVID-19 has taught some best practices for small business owners to understand that we need to be mindful of keeping our team healthy and helping to motivate our team sincerely,” Reyneke said.

The virtual communication strategies dealers and manufacturers alike have relied on during shelter-in-place orders extends further to networking and educational opportunities. COVID-19 became a national and

global concern as what many in the water industry consider to be “conference season” was just gearing up. The WQA Convention & Exposition pivoted to a virtual format, while several regional WQA gatherings faced cancellations. Likewise, the WQA Mid-Year Leadership Conference, scheduled to take place in September 2020, also preemptively pivoted to a virtual format. The American Water Works Association (AWWA) Convention & Exposition was canceled, and as of press time, the Water Environment Federation Technical Exhibition & Conference (WEFTEC) announced a part-virtual program.

While these cancellations and amendments changed previously anticipated networking and educational opportunities, educational providers and communicators have discovered new avenues to meet those industry needs, albeit in different ways than prior to the pandemic. While in-person networking and education remain important career building factors, new virtual communication avenues may play an increasing role in the future of the water industry.

Another, perhaps surprising, aspect the increase in virtual communication has unlocked is an increasing blend of the professional and personal—with many professionals working from home part- or full-time during shelter-in-place orders—which lends a human element to professional interactions. In a virtual work environment, suddenly family pets or children home from school have appeared in video calls or compete for prioritization during a work day. This may serve as a reminder to customers and employees alike that all professionals have many facets.

Susan Keaton, marketing and communications coordinator for the WQA, offered advice to businesses working to communicate with their customers in a pandemic world in a video call with WQP.

“The thing that I think is important to remember is that we’re all in this together,” Keaton said. “Everyone is going through all this at the same time, and the more we can do to be kind to each other and show each other some compassion

and understanding is great.”

Keaton’s advice reaffirms the balance of personal and professional during the COVID-19 new normal, but perhaps more importantly, it stresses the remarkable

resiliency of the water quality industry and the businesses that comprise it. **WQP**

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