Hey, Alexa, Is My Water Safe?

John arrived at his smart-house on time, despite the teleporting crash along the red line. The house was cleaner than when he had left and, because he was trying to lose a few pounds and build some muscle, a well-balanced "Jack LaLanne" dinner—the latest retro-trend in dieting—was already on the table. The clean house and dinner were both signs that his smart-house was learning his needs. He was pleased that he had scaled up when buying this house because his previous house had bugs. This house, while stretching his budget, came with Socrates—an artificial intelligence assistant—which was a considerable upgrade. According to many online comments, the great thing about the Socrates package was that you could ask it a series of questions to get to the truth. As he sat down to dinner, John realized he wanted something cool, refreshing, and healthy to drink. Leaning back in his chair, he said into the air, "Hey, Socrates, is my tap water safe to drink?"

In college, I thought it would be fun to take a philosophy class. The only assignment was to write a paper, applying a great philosopher's teaching to a modern-day reality. My topic was about the risk of losing original knowledge as society became increasingly reliant on computers for answers. And thus, as far-fetched as it sounds, my thesis was that in the future, when a computer told us that two plus two was five, that answer would become the truth.

Recently I began to think about how society is becoming dependent on artificial intelligence (AI) assistants such as Siri and Alexa. There was a time when, if you wanted advice on something—like the name of a good mechanic—you'd ask a trusted neighbor or friend. Now, all you have to do is ask an AI assistant or search for recommendations online. As much as we may scoff at this, most of us do it, and more and more we are relying on this form of information for decision-making.

What does this societal change mean for water utilities? Maybe not much now, but the risk, I think, was outlined in my college paper—who decides the "truth" about water? Will it be those intimately responsible for providing water, and with real knowledge, or will it be computer technologies?

The key, and perhaps bigger, challenge for a utility is who owns the relationship with a utility's customer. In this era of AI, all businesses are battling for customer trust, and AI assistants like Siri and Alexa are changing how relationship-building strategies are implemented. As customers increasingly go first to an AI assistant for "trusted" information, it seems that a business will lose influence.

For many competitive businesses, the drive to maintain influence now requires creating relationships with technology platforms. The goal, not unlike working with a grocery store to get premium shelf space for a product, is to improve the likelihood that their products, services, or information will appear at the top of a customer's search. We should expect that marketing strategies to support goals like this, such as buying AdWords, are only going to increase.

For the most part, however, water utilities don't operate in the competitive businesses space. So, does the advantage of these new marketing strategies apply? Utilities, like competitive businesses, increasingly act with intention to build trusted relationships with their customers. My observation is that a utility's primary motivation is to help its customers appreciate the value of water service—how it protects the public's health and enhances their daily life and community. Achieving this goal is possible because utilities have direct relationships with their customers. However, as utility customers begin seeking answers from convenient sources such as an AI assistant, the utility may lose its position as the trusted advisor unless it takes steps to be on the top of a customer's search list.

All is not lost, however. AI platforms also collect data about customer preferences, and this information can be a benefit for utilities. It seems logical that, as AI platform data about customer preference can help other businesses, so can such data help utilities. They could use the data to adjust their customer relationship strategy to improve their value of water messaging in ways that resonate specifically with their customers. While others may be more likely to buy their position on a search list, utilities should be able to achieve their goals by aligning with customer preferences.

While AI assistants like Siri and Alexa (and maybe Socrates) are a reality, the fact is that customers are still in charge; it is their preference that ultimately matters. It seems inevitable that utilities will ultimately implement AI platform strategies to ensure that their customers get the truth about water from trustworthy sources who have real knowledge about water.

And because two plus two is still four, I have no doubt how Socrates answered John.