

“Branding Moments”

From the Utility Branding Network

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Branding of Recycled Water

Those who have proposed recycled water projects have been required to address the public's concerns or outright opposition to the concept. These concerns and opposition stem from negative perceptions (or brands) about wastewater and water reuse. Recycled water presents several branding challenges, including the following:

The Source/Quality Connection - For the most part, people still associate water quality with its physical source. The source of recycled water comes across as unappealing. This is why we talked about the utility becoming the source of quality in previous installments of Branding Moments.

Naming of Recycled Water - The term “recycled water” emphasizes where the water came from, not what it is used for. Naming based on source rather than on use is a missed branding opportunity. Recycled water is actually a series of manufactured products that have multiple uses. These products include irrigation water, different grades of industrial water, and water for replenishing potable supplies. There is probably no better example of sending this "manufactured product" message than West Basin Municipal Water District's "designer water." West Basin produces several different water qualities produced for a variety of uses. We should not hide the fact that the water is recycled, but the product should be named or at least promoted based on its acceptability for the proposed use.

Recycled Water is Unnatural - Historically, man and his waste have fit into the natural order of things. However, the industrialized world produces massive amounts of manmade contaminants, which is far from natural. Wastewater is not only branded as waste, but as unnatural or toxic waste -- once again, emphasizing the need for utilities to break the physical source/quality connection in the minds of their consumers.

Confusing Communications Practices - When we post purple signs that say “Recycled Water, Do Not Drink,” we are implying that the water is not drinkable because it is recycled. In fact, it is not fit for drinking because it was treated to be acceptable for irrigation. This practice brands recycled water as non-potable when we know that recycled water can be purified so that it is acceptable for replenishing potable water supplies. Recycled water should be defined as "reused water that is purified to the level necessary for its use, whether for irrigation, industrial applications, or for replenishing the potable water supply." If we adopt this definition and branding strategy, the sign should arguably say "Irrigation Water, Do Not Drink." Utility managers have described recycled water

as acceptable for non-potable uses only to find themselves promoting potable reuse just a few years later. A good branding strategy helps us to avoid confusing our audiences and inciting conflict.

These examples and strategies should remind utility managers that the behavior of consumers and the level of support we receive from our communities have a lot to do with how effectively we brand the utility and its products. Without a clear branding strategy, it is all too easy to send confusing messages and foster concerns.

Questions and Comments - Feel free to ask questions or to comment on this email. Questions and comments will be compiled and responded to with a follow-up call or email. Please reply to this message or email us at news@utilitybranding.net.

About the Network

The Utility Branding Network for water and wastewater agencies is committed to helping utilities better understand branding principles and to help them build a strong brand with their communities. A strong brand increases trust, support, and investment.

If you are not yet a member of the Network, or just want more information, please contact John Ruetten at john@utilitybranding.net or Jeff Mosher at jeff@utilitybranding.net.

The Network is administered by the National Water Research Institute (NWRI).

Utility Branding Network

c/o NWRI
18700 Ward Street
P.O. Box 8096
Fountain Valley, CA 92728-8096
(714) 378-3278
www.utilitybranding.net