

“Branding Moments”

From the Utility Branding Network

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Drugs in Our Water

If any of us out there doubt that utilities, municipal water, and the water industry are being "branded," then we were not paying attention to the news recently. The Associated Press (AP) investigation on pharmaceuticals in water came out with headlines like "Pharmaceuticals Lurking in the U.S. Drinking Water." Don't you just love words like "lurking"? The AP investigation found that tiny concentrations of a wide array of drugs are present in the water supplies of 24 major metropolitan areas, representing approximately 41 million people.

In our last installment of Branding Moments, we asked an important question: "Why does branding apply to utilities? Utilities are monopolies and do not have competitors."

Stories like "drugs in our water" are one of the major reasons branding applies. Utilities and the industry are being branded – and often in negative ways. The "no branding strategy" approach amounts to wearing a target and inviting others to define us, accurately or not.

Although news stories did report that the concentrations of drugs were tiny, they also included damaging sentences like, "But the presence of so many drugs in so much of our drinking water is heightening worries among scientists of long-term consequences to public health." The EPA was quoted as saying, "We recognize this as a growing concern and are taking it very seriously." This information, including the idea of long-term effects, does not help the average person relax, even if they accept that the drug concentrations are small. What may be more damaging are suggestions that utilities have to be "pressed" to communicate about this issue and that the drugs "are not removed by water treatment processes." Both of these points contradict the idea that the utility is the trusted source of quality and information.

The good news is that our media is rich with a constant flow of new information, which means that even major stories quickly become old news. The bad news is that these types of stories, over time and combined with messages from bottled water and point-of-use treatment companies, have a cumulative impact that erodes trust in municipal water and water utilities. Utilities need that trust to secure appropriate investment in water resources and infrastructure.

Criticizing the media, or thinking it will change, is a non-starter. A persistent and well-thought-out program for building utility brands employing both local and regional efforts is the proper response to negative publicity and the fact that we allow ourselves to be defined by others.