

## **Branding Moments**

***From the "Utility Branding Network"***  
**December 18, 2007**

In our last branding moments email we introduced the idea that water utilities should brand themselves as the "source of quality." This branding strategy helps to efficiently communicate an important reality for most communities. Water is made fit for drinking by the competencies, values, and efforts of the water utility. This "source of quality" brand is especially useful when developing new water supplies from impaired sources such as recycled water. In this email we will explore in more detail what it means for utilities to become the source of quality in the minds of their customers.

**Understanding the Science** - The average person does not understand the significance of water testing results and their relationship to safety and public health (even professionals debate the science). They may even question why the water is not 100% pure. Given people's inability and lack of desire in understanding the science, they will rely on common-sense reasoning to come to conclusions about the safety or healthfulness of the water.

**Common Sense and Trust** - The primary common-sense factors for trusting the water are taste and odor. It is hard for people to believe that the water quality is good if it smells or tastes bad, or even if it just smells or has a taste. Some may believe that the water is safe, but fewer will accept that it is healthy or good for you. Addressing taste and odor issues will always improve confidence. Moving beyond the aesthetic factors, water quality confidence can be increased by helping consumers understand certain qualities of the water and the efforts of the utility.

**Better Than Before** - People's confidence in the water will be higher if they know that the water quality is better than it has been in the past. This is true for one simple reason: The vast majority of people have a history of drinking municipal water and feeling no ill effects. If the water is better than before, then their personal experience is valid and can be a launching point for increased confidence. More importantly, if they perceive that the water quality has degraded in any way, then their past experience becomes invalid and they are likely to become concerned.

**Knowledge, Diligence, Carefulness** - If they are paying attention, people will look at the actions and communications of the utility to assess water quality. Is the utility *increasing its knowledge* about contaminants and improving quality? Does the utility appear to be *diligent* with respect to water testing and treatment? Is the utility being *careful* with the health of the public and the management of the water? A utility becomes the source of quality when it tailors its actions and communications such that these perceptions are growing in the minds of their customers. Testing for more contaminants than required by regulations, or having a comprehensive distribution system testing program are examples of decisions and actions that demonstrate all three of these values.

**The Consumer Confidence Report** - Water utilities are required to produce a Consumer Confidence Report. Providing water quality data may help increase confidence because it demonstrates openness. However, utilities would be well served to provide supporting information specifically designed to build the common-sense perceptions described above. Building these perceptions will help the Consumer Confidence Report achieve the goal articulated in its name.

**Regulations** - Finally, complying with regulations is not a strong confidence builder and does not necessarily build the "source of quality" brand. This is because regulatory compliance is often viewed as the minimum standard. Also, regulations are imposed values and therefore not attributable to the utility. Although often technically justifiable, fighting regulations can be dangerous when viewed from a branding perspective. This is because it can appear that the utility, or the municipality, is fighting against higher water quality. This is not a "source of quality" moment. If the utility feels compelled to fight, it should do so within the context of other elements of its brand. We will discuss these other elements in later installments of Branding Moments.

**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](mailto:news@utilitybranding.net) .

## Have a Happy Holiday Season!

### ***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](mailto:john@utilitybranding.net) or Jeff Mosher at [jeff@utilitybranding.net](mailto:jeff@utilitybranding.net). The Network is administered by the National Water Research Institute (NWRI).*

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