Clarity and Credibility
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The Environmental Stewardship Brand

When it comes to branding, clarity is critical and actions speak louder than words. In previous editions of "Branding Moments," we have summarized elements of both the water and wastewater utility brands, such as water reliability, water quality, public health, and environmental stewardship. However, the real challenge for utilities is to clearly understand what these commitments to value mean and how to demonstrate credibility with respect to a given commitment. Often, utility managers are hesitant to make a commitment to something because they think their organization needs to be perfect in its execution to the commitment. Toyota is known for reliability, but their vehicles also break down every so often. What is required is that the utility be truly committed and demonstrate credibility through its actions. In this and subsequent editions of "Branding Moments," we will explore in more detail key elements of the utility brand, what these elements mean, and how to demonstrate credibility.

The Commitment: Protecting Natural and Local Environments

What It Means - The word "environment" is a general term, so we need to be clear on what "protecting the environment" means. For example, a wastewater utility needs to protect nature, as well as the natural environment's role in serving wildlife and people. Protecting the environment also involves being sensitive to people's local environment, including the impact of the utility's operations (such as odor, visual aesthetics, and traffic). Another factor is that the public is becoming more interested in being "green," or pro-environment, meaning they may expect more from utilities in regards to environmental stewardship. The challenge for utilities is to define the appropriate level of environmental commitment and demonstrate credibility with respect to that commitment.

Demonstrating Credibility - Many wastewater utility staff members think of themselves as environmentalists. However, it is important to remember that compliance with an environmental regulation may not completely demonstrate an environmental ethic because the utility has no other option but to comply. Compliance is not a strong branding moment because ethics are demonstrated by the organization's choices. So, what does it mean to be committed to the environment? Environments are local; therefore, **demonstrating commitment begins with being knowledgeable about the**

specific environment that you are impacting. Without this knowledge, people will justifiably question the utility's actual values and dedication.

For example, if you are discharging treated effluent into a lake, river, or ocean, it follows that you should be gathering, sponsoring, or at least advocating for the collection of information on the characteristics and health of that environment. It also means you err on the conservative side if adequate information is not available. Given typical financial pressures, adhering to these standards can be difficult. Many environmentalists have a difficult time trusting that wastewater utilities are environmental advocates because they know that agency officials are often pressured to address the "waste issue" at the least possible cost. Because of these pressures, utility professionals often find themselves in the middle, trying to balance costs with protecting the environment. Balance can be a good thing, but it is difficult to have it both ways.

Given these credibility issues, becoming known for environmental stewardship requires that the utility expand its thinking. Utility managers should advocate for investment in the environment that goes beyond regulations and the traditional waste management function. Fighting regulations, even if their value is "questionable," is not the best way to build the "protectors of the environment" brand. On the positive side, many wastewater agencies are already investing hundreds of millions - if not billions - of dollars in treatment and processes designed to protect the environment. This fact cannot be disputed and should be communicated.

Knowledge of the specific environment and local issues is also key when working with residents who may be potentially impacted by the utility's facilities or operations. Collaborating with the community about the best ways to minimize impacts or enhance the aesthetics of local facilities is an effective brand-building technique. **Assuming you already know what locals want with respect to their environment does not demonstrate credibility and is a recipe for conflict.** It also misses an opportunity to build important relationships. Facilities that have been developed without collaborating with the local community, or have poor aesthetics, will brand the utility in negative ways. Aesthetics brand people, places, products, and organizations. True or not, it is hard to imagine that students can learn in a dirty or poorly maintained school.

In summary, be <u>clear</u> on the standard of value you are committed to and demonstrate credibility through <u>actions</u> that reflect organizational <u>choices and ethics</u>.

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.*

I*f 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).

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