

# Using the CONSUMER CONFIDENCE REPORT to Build a Positive Brand

## CCR Branding Opportunities

The **Consumer Confidence Report** (CCR) presents an opportunity for water utility managers to increase confidence in their water and enhance the utility's brand. The following insights and checklist provide guidance for making the CCR more meaningful, interesting, and effective in building trust with consumers.

## Branding = Perception

When we talk about brands and the process of branding, we are addressing perceptions, beliefs, or judgments. A brand is what a person believes they can count on from a person, product, or organization.

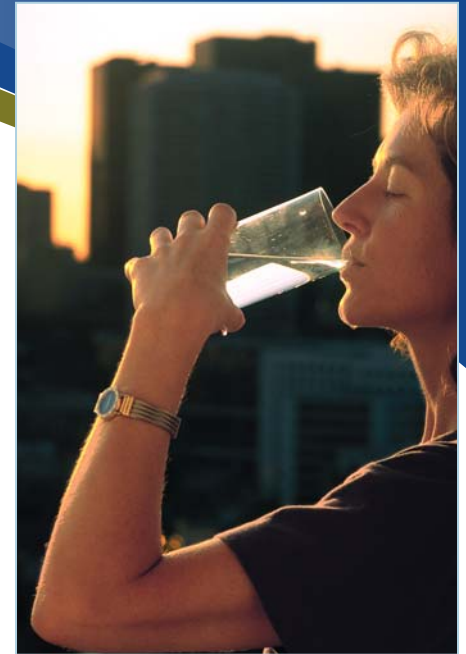
"Healthy" or "good for you" are brands people often apply to mountain spring water. Research indicates that many people have branded tap water as "safe," but "not healthy." Arguably, the majority of people think that bottled water tastes better and is better for them than municipal water. These judgments provide insight into people's beliefs about tap water, the value of water, and the roles and competency of water utilities.

## Confidence Comes with Clarity

We can be certain that people do not understand or appreciate the significance of data provided in the CCR. Rather, people use common-sense ideas or indicators to determine whether they trust the water or utility. Some of these ideas are best expressed in the form of questions that consumers might have:

- Does the water have a taste or odor?
- Is the water better than it was 5 years ago or 1 year ago?
- Is the utility striving to improve and increase its knowledge?
- Do the decisions and activities of the utility demonstrate diligence and/or carefulness?
- Does the utility communicate in clear and meaningful ways?
- Has the utility explained the meaningful implications of the test results?
- What actions are the utility taking as a result of the test data?

The answers to these simple, yet important questions will brand the utility and tap water in positive or negative ways. If the CCR does a good job in answering these questions, it will be effective in enhancing the brand of the water and utility. If the report is not well structured or provides detailed information without clear and meaningful context, then it will not be read, understood, or increase confidence. It may even contribute to indifference or negative perceptions.



Prepared by:

## Utility Branding Network

for water and wastewater agencies

*Increasing Trust, Support, and Investment*

The National Water Research Institute manages the Utility Branding Network on behalf of water and wastewater agencies to help utilities better understand the principals and benefits of branding. For more information, please contact:

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# CCR Checklist for Building a Positive Brand

✔ **Municipal Water Is a Unique and Valuable Product.** Municipal water is a unique and valuable product with a unique price. It is delivered to the home in large quantities and is critical to our quality of life in many ways. Avoid comparing it to bottled water, which is a different product with a different value. Find subtle ways to remind people of tap water's multiple uses and value.

✔ **Become the “Source of Quality.”** The objective of the CCR should be to increase confidence in the water. However, we have another important branding objective: to establish the utility as the trusted source of quality. This is important because people tend to associate water quality with its physical source (“Water from a mountain spring is best”). Consumers need to understand that investment, competency, and diligence on the part of the utility are what make water fit for drinking and other uses. This source of quality brand reflects the importance of appropriate investment and the local utility's values. This brand is especially important when implementing new sources of water, such as recycled water and brackish groundwater.

✔ **Use Information to Communicate Motivations.** All information in the CCR should support a motivation that relates to providing water that people can be confident in. Always attach information to a motivation. Avoid sharing any information without communicating why it is important. For example, describe a treatment step for the purpose of communicating the benefits it provides. Information without motivations is not meaningful, rarely interesting, and often confusing.

✔ **Keep the CCR Short.** Keep the report as short as possible while still complying with regulations and building confidence. The more meaningful the information, the shorter you can make the report and maintain its effectiveness. People are more likely to read a shorter and more meaningful document.

✔ **Consider Using Headlines.** Using a newspaper format that includes headlines can be effective. Headlines highlight important issues and attract attention. They also provide meaningful context for more detailed supporting information. For example, a headline might read “Tests Show No *Cryptosporidium* or *Giardia* in our Drinking Water” or “New Water Treatment Process Improves Water Quality.” Also, a newspaper format encourages you to make stories interesting and limit their length.

✔ **Provide Clarity and Build Confidence at the Beginning.** Provide an introductory paragraph that describes why the report is being produced and its objectives. Also, summarize meaningful information so the reader is prepared for what is to follow and why it is important. Describe why people should be confident in the water. Do this by summarizing the meaningful results of the test data, your efforts in treatment and testing, and activities designed

to improve water quality. Consumers need to understand that things are improving, you know more than you did a year ago, and that you are diligent and careful about protecting their health and quality of life.



✔ **Describe Your Treatment Processes.**

Use visual media that illustrate multiple treatment steps. Describe the motivation or benefit of each step. Stay away from overly technical terms. Highlight processes that demonstrate redundancy or a conservative approach.

✔ **Describe How and Why You Test.** Describe both treatment plant testing and distribution system testing. Describe why you test the way you do (the motivation, even if required by regulation), and highlight if and why you are going beyond compliance. The purpose for communicating about testing is to demonstrate increasing knowledge, diligence, and carefulness.

✔ **Don't Tie Your Value and Brand to Regulations.** Regulations are intended to protect the public and create value. However, do not emphasize compliance when you talk about your activities and investments. Stick to the meaningful motivations of improving water quality and protecting public health. People will trust you because of your *values* and not because of the regulations.

✔ **Put Source Water Protection in the Proper Context.** Spending time talking about water sources can encourage the physical source/water quality connection. Clearly communicate that source water protection is part of *your* multifaceted plan to maintain and improve water quality. This approach upholds the utility as the source of quality.

✔ **Preface Report Data with Meaningful Conclusions.** Introduce the report's required data with meaningful information about the results. What are the consequences of the data? How has water quality improved due to your efforts? What further actions are you taking to improve water quality? It is better to be honest and meaningful than overly technical and confusing.

✔ **Avoid “Failure to Monitor” Notices.** Although it may not represent a public health risk, a “failure to monitor” notice does not send a message of diligence or carefulness. This bad branding moment cannot be avoided if you failed to monitor, so avoid monitoring failures. If unavoidable, explain why it happened and the corrective action.

For more information on using the CCR to build a positive brand, please contact John Ruetten at [john@utlitybranding.net](mailto:john@utlitybranding.net).