



January 28, 2009 - Reaching People and Making an Impression

The December 2008 “Branding Moments” installment addressed the fact that branding is often thought of as a communications issue. We made the case that branding is a fundamental strategy issue. The brand defines much more than what you say. It defines the value you provide. It defines who you are.

Ultimately, the brand is built by making impressions on people and developing relationships. This is accomplished most effectively when a customer interacts directly with a product or service, but can also be accomplished through different types of communications. Branding is not the same as advertising – and advertising is often the least effective and most expensive tactic for building a brand.

Connecting with People When They Are Paying Attention - Reaching out and making an impression with the general public can be daunting. One could argue that most utilities do not have the resources to make connections with a large number of busy and distracted people. How can water or wastewater utilities afford to compete with all the other messages people are receiving? How can we get people to pay attention?

The simple answer is to make an impression with community members when they are already paying attention. People are paying attention when they are paying their water or wastewater bill, reporting a problem, visiting a recycling center, or experiencing water or sewer construction in their neighborhood. All of these represent opportunities for making a lasting impression. However, taking advantage of this opportunity requires that branding be a high priority.

Taking Advantage of Branding Moments - Every time a utility customer or community member is paying attention is both a branding moment and a potential branding opportunity. For instance:

- **The Monthly Utility Bill** provides a branding opportunity if it reads more like a simple statement of the value that customers receive in return for their service fees and investment. Bill inserts can also be used to build a brand, as demonstrated in the **Butler County Department of Environmental Services case study**.
- **The Construction Planning Phase** is an opportunity to collaborate with community members about project details and aesthetics. This process allows people to get to know utility employees and demonstrates that the utility is concerned about the quality of life of its customers.

- **Current Construction Projects** provide a branding opportunity when door hangers or other forms of communications are used to clarify the value of the construction investment and highlight the utility's brand.
- **Customer Service** personnel should make it very easy for customers to conduct business with the utility, whether it is discussing options for paying bills, finding a recycling center, or resolving a problem.

These interactions, and others, are opportunities for making lasting impressions on community members. Private companies pay large sums of money to gain similar access. Utilities already have it and should use it to their advantage.

More Efficient Communications - Building your brand when people are already paying attention is the most efficient form of communicating. Why? Because you do not have to spend money to get their attention, and because branding by definition addresses what is meaningful to customers and the community. Without the clarity of purpose and the focused messages defined by a branding program, it is easy to miss branding opportunities, develop communications that just don't make an impression, or -- worse yet -- confuse people and make a negative impression. It is worth thinking about as many utilities are being asked by policy makers to do more with less.

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