

Who Said the 'S' Word?

Sustainability in the Midst of Chaos

Debbie Nelson

As our climate changes and water resources deplete, it is imperative for water and wastewater organizations to develop strategic plans to ensure sustainabil-

ity of our most precious resource—water. This task can be understandably daunting; however, by implementing manageable tools and communication strategies, it is possible to build and maintain customer relationships with the intent of sustainability.

Sustainability is widely defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The current situation we are facing with our water resources is already compromising the needs of future generations. Without dedication to resolve the problem through environmental stewardship, the needs of the future may become irrelevant.

To accomplish sustainability, a public utility must first be committed to the cause. Then it must develop a strong organizational identity within its community, with a commitment to educate its stakeholders about the utility and the impact each individual has on the preservation of our future resources. Innovative communications strategies can build this relationship and educate customers, public officials, and other community stakeholders. Using these tools to increase public involvement will make great strides toward guaranteeing the resources needed in the future to live, promote economic growth, maintain industrial productivity, and more.

The methods of building customer confidence through an informed staff, community networking, and customer-friendly materials and Web sites are vital components of a strong communications plan. Utilizing the media as a public-awareness resource and continued involvement with key constituents, schools, and community groups will provide more opportunities for engaging stakeholders about the importance of sustainability. By simply providing your customers with the information they need to be educated about the problem, you can begin developing the source for the cure.

Determine Your Agenda

When committing to a sustainability program, it is important to develop a plan of action with explicit details of how your organization will pursue sustainability and in what ways you will encourage the public to participate. Determine your overall objective and

Debbie Nelson is a principal with DNA Creative Communications LLC, a full-service advertising agency in Greenville, South Carolina. This article was presented as a technical paper at the 2009 South Carolina Environmental Conference.

set goals with measurable results for the campaign. Define your agenda (i.e., overall water conservation, increased environmental stewardship efforts in the community, advocacy of green initiatives in the workplace). Once you have determined your purpose, educate internally and externally. Motivating behavior is key in developing a successful campaign.

In a 2005 study by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Agency asked the question “What hinders people and organizations from adopting stewardship behaviors?” Through research with various stakeholders and organizations dedicated to sustainability, the findings showed that there is the perception among individuals that small actions do not really make a difference.

In the pursuit of sustainability, educating your stakeholders about the differences they can make, big and small, will help your campaign succeed. Initiate programs for sustainable solutions that the community and your employees can participate in. Research and understand their perspective on stewardship, and provide the tools to engage, educate, and challenge them to enhance their stewardship efforts. There are a variety of ways to do this, and finding the best combination for your organization is crucial in protecting a resource that we can not re-create, but only preserve.

There are four key areas your organization must consider in developing a campaign for sustainability:

- 1) Strengthen your organizational identity.
- 2) Develop a communications plan: internal and external.
- 3) Establish a strong public relations plan and stick to it.
- 4) Provide educational opportunities and tools to promote your cause.

Continued on page 50

Strengthen Your Organizational Identity

It is imperative to define how you want your customers to perceive you. Make your message known and don't allow other people or organizations to define you. Be clear, unique, and consistent in your messaging, from your logo to your correspondence. The best way to encourage people to trust you and your agenda is to know who you are. Develop a brand and use it consistently.

Along with strengthening your organization identity, develop a brand for your commitment to sustainability. Create a logo or a mascot that can be the spokesperson for your agenda. Define your objectives through this brand on all materials relating to sustainability. Distribute that brand so it is well-known in the community, and find ways through your brand to promote your environmental stewardship along with your stand on sustainability.

If you use your brand consistently you will remain relevant and you will break through the chaos. A breakthrough leads to understanding the problem, and understanding leads to a solution for sustainability.

Develop a Communications Plan: Internal & External

Taking time to understand your customers and to build their confidence in your organization is vital in disseminating an effective message. If you develop a plan to dedicate your organization to sustainability, then your

customers will be more inclined to participate.

Develop a chart mapping out your goals, implementation, time frame, and the person responsible for administering the initiative. Lead by example. Create steps to ensure a successful campaign and determine the roles of your organization, your employees, and the community; then disperse it. Define your commitment to sustainability and feed that message to your customers. Conduct surveys to find out what is important to your customers and how they feel about your organization and sustainability.

Educate your employees so they understand your agenda and their role in supporting the cause. Employees can be your biggest voice and your best ally. If your employees can sing praises about your organization, then they will do so within the community building stronger confidence in your organization.

Distribute the information to your customers. Develop an internal evaluation of your organization's current and potential sustainable practices. Determine ways the organization can enhance current processes and equipment to support the goal of sustainability. Look into various "green" programs for ways to upgrade facilities that can increase long-term savings.

Focus on simple initiatives, like recycling or going paperless, to begin your program and promote them throughout the organization. Offer incentives to employees who drive energy-efficient vehicles, carpool, or ride bicycles to work.

Find ways to educate customers about your message and your organization. Create an informative Web site that focuses on your agenda, explains who you are, describes your purpose as a water or wastewater treatment provider, and educates visitors on how you are a key component in the future of your com-

munity. Your Web site is crucial in sharing your message and reaching a broad audience.

Communicate with your customers on a regular basis and make them understand why you care and why they should care. Remember to train your customer service department to answer key questions about sustainability, why it is important, and ways people can help so when calls are coming in, there is no doubt where you stand.

Develop an organization newsletter, electronic or hardcopy, which includes a regular section on sustainability and tips that stakeholders can use to participate in the initiative. Encourage customers and employees to suggest other environmental programs your organization and the community can implement. Develop a presentation format that your speakers' bureau can take to various community organizations and schools to promote your message.

Utilize "new media," or "social media," to continue your mission. These are important ways to reach your community in vast numbers that should not be overlooked. Become aware of the various types of social media available and designate someone to manage this effort for your organization. These avenues provide you with the opportunity to spread your message and boost confidence in your organization. Your message can be spread quickly through these types of media, and by utilizing the correct options, you can control the perception of your commitment.

Encourage industrial and commercial customers to develop their own sustainability programs. Create an award to be presented to companies that dedicate themselves to, or make great advances in, encouraging environmental stewardship. Encourage them to set goals for reducing their carbon "footprint" and reduce their impact on water resources.

Keeping your message in front of your local and state leaders is essential. These individuals are important in influencing change and are significant in developing your platform. Tell them your plan for sustainability and give them a role in ensuring the success of the campaign. Make them a part of the solution and find specific ways that they can participate.

Host small events to provide them with updates on the efforts to protect our water. Send them regular communication in the mail or through online resources. Build your rela-

Continued on page 52

Educational Tools



The Freshwater Freddie FOG campaign focuses on the proper disposal of fats, oils and grease. This program included bookmarks, coloring books, brochures, a stand-up cut-out of the mascot Freddie and a grease can, all including environmental tips for the purpose of teaching children about stewardship at a young age.



Renewable Water Resources (ReWa), a utility in Greenville, South Carolina, hosts various tours of each of their plants to various schools, groups and organizations to develop a strong understanding of the wastewater treatment process and its importance throughout the community.

Continued from page 50

tionship with them and remind them about your organization and your goals.

Establish a Strong PR Campaign & Develop Media Relationships

Developing strong relationships with the media is one of the most important steps to spreading your message effectively. Once you have defined your plan for sustainability, deliver it to the media. Make it a point to generate conversations with key reporters in your community and find out about their areas of interest that are related to you or your organization. Become an expert that they will call when they need a comment or a resource for information.

Develop a strong PR campaign and stick to it. Find reasons to write press releases and follow up with the media once they have been distributed. Find a resource that can provide media relations for you and keep it at the forefront of your communication plan.

Introduce the media to your cause and showcase your accomplishments in the areas of sustainability and environmental stewardship. Find ways to recognize other individuals and industries for taking a part in the cause for sustainability and applaud them through media relations. Develop best practices for your efforts in sustainability and make them known.

Provide Educational Opportunities & Tools

Find ways within the community to partner with schools and organizations to develop a stronger message. Through these partnerships you can provide educational opportunities that will reach these targeted individuals

and increase the probability of impact.

Finding ways to create a face-to-face interaction will help demonstrate the importance of your message. Offer tours to businesses, schools, universities, and community organizations; use them not only to develop an understanding of your organization and its processes, but also to offer a face-to-face opportunity to encourage sustainability.

Hosting training workshops within your industry to promote environmental stewardship among organizations or other industries is another great way to support your message. Encourage others to jump on board with the fight to protect our resources, and support their efforts as well.

Become a mentor for others who may want

to make a difference but are not sure where to begin. Develop and distribute educational materials about the importance of sustainability that can be used in classrooms or within the community as a whole. Provide them as handouts at community events or for other organizations.

Conclusion

After you develop a cohesive strategy and implement a communications plan to educate your stakeholders, continue to engage your community on the topic of sustainability. Encourage people to be environmentally responsible and send regular communications to remind them of the difference they can make. Influence them through changes in your organization and allow them a look into the processes you and your organization have committed to long-term.

Keep your organization's identity in the community by sponsoring environmental events and causes. Make sure your community knows the proactive steps your organization is taking, and offer to help mentor and educate others on the importance of sustainable practices.

Becoming a well-known community leader in environmental efforts not only will bring a positive light to your organization, but will also increase community awareness and participation. All progress begins with one drop in the bucket, but all those drops together can effectively restore our precious resource of water for generations to come.

References

- United States Environmental Protection Agency Innovation Action Council. (2005). *Everyday Choices: Opportunities for Environmental Stewardship*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. ♻



ReWa provides a program each year that allows local Girl Scouts to earn their Water Drop Patch during its Environmental Awareness Day through learning and participating in various activities, including a demonstration of the various tests conducted at the wastewater treatment facilities. This is the only program in the state of South Carolina that provides a way for Scouts to earn this patch.