

The (Public) Power of Branding

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Connecting with customers is essential in any industry. For public power utilities, it can be especially challenging. Power, while vital to everyday life, is rarely at the forefront of customers' minds. When it is, it's usually triggered by negative experiences (the lights are out, the bill was unexpectedly high) rather than positive perceptions. In today's customer-focused, highly personalized consumer culture, building those positive perceptions intentionally, meaningfully and consistently is more crucial than ever.

This thoughtful development of a company's perception or persona is known as branding, and if it's not already at the forefront of your marketing strategy as a public power utility, read on.

"A utility's brand is all about the promise it makes to its customers," said Edith Bullard, senior vice president of marketing for PCI, an award-winning marketing agency based in the D.C. area that

specializes in corporate, not-for-profit and government clients (among them, APPA, whose own rebranding is currently underway). “[It] should capture the very essence of an organization.”

Branding starts with understanding your central commitment to your customers — What, exactly, do you do for them? How do you do it? And, perhaps most importantly, why do you do it? — and ends with translating that promise into the basis of every business and marketing strategy. Which, if you’re doing it well, means branding is a never-ending effort.

“While marketing campaigns, taglines and even logos may change over time, your brand should be constant,” Bullard said. “Like a person’s personality, even if they change their hairstyle, the essence of the person does not change.” Consistency, without sacrificing creativity, is the key to maintaining a memorable, meaningful brand presence.

Beyond its universal benefits, like higher awareness and greater positive perception, branding has particular advantages for public power utilities. As providers of a public need, customer loyalty may be largely guaranteed, but your customers’ trust, and your community’s continuing investment and support, is not. Strong branding, based on insights and feedback from your community, guided by authenticity and creativity, and embodying your company promises, demonstrates a level of care and commitment that connects with customers, and adds value and validity to your communications.

“Fulfilling that [brand] promise, day in and day out, is what changes the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of customers,” Bullard said. Weak branding? It doesn’t just underscore any existing negative perceptions about your public power utility; it can actually create them. “If a utility’s brand does not result in greater preference, permission to enter new markets, or increased margins, then you don’t have a brand. You have a business,” Bullard stressed.

According to the public power utilities APPA interviewed, a brand is what they want, and they are more than willing to invest the time, talent and funds required to bring it to life. From full-scale developments and rebrands, to more targeted updates of key public-facing mediums like websites, the following utilities readily shared their recent branding experiences, challenges and advice for fellow public power providers.