

## **Celebrate Good Times ... And Get Your Customers Involved With Your Story**

*By Stephen V. Smith*

The beginning of the year is a great time to flip through the calendar looking for reasons to celebrate. Once you identify a few opportunities, make plans to welcome your customers to the party.

There are many accomplishments you can highlight as part of your communications program. Perhaps you've reached a safety milestone or set a new reliability standard. Maybe you're rolling out a new service, or energizing a new business or residential development.

Years of service is a particularly strong milestone to celebrate — especially if your utility has been serving your area for a round number of years, such as 65 or 70. You can build a multi-faceted communications program around this celebration.

Let's look at our company as an example. On New Year's Day, WordSouth turned 20 years old. Here are some principles that are guiding our plans, along with some ideas on how you can put these concepts to work in your organization.

1. **Tell your real story.** Why are you celebrating? Longevity is not enough. Years of service is just a fact, a number, a statistic. When you tell the story about your milestone of service, talk about what you have accomplished during those years — how you've powered people's lives, supported small businesses, recruited jobs, electrified classrooms and been a vital part of helping the community thrive over the decades.

At WordSouth, we have a very intentional attitude that guides everything we do: We want to be more than a vendor to the utilities we serve; we want to be their true partner. We focus on building relationships to last for years, even decades. Our clients have a mission, and that mission becomes ours by extension as we come alongside them to help tell their stories. As we celebrate 20 years, that's the story we want to tell. The whole "founded in a spare bedroom, on one small contract and a prayer" angle is certainly interesting and compelling, but our real story is what we've been able to help our clients accomplish since.

2. **Focus on your customers.** You have built a reliable distribution system. You have leveraged TVA programs to help families become more energy efficient and businesses operate smarter. You've played a leading role in economic development. Maybe you've ventured into other services, such as telecommunications. When you talk about these accomplishments in the context of "look what we've done," the eyes of your audience glaze over quickly. Center your communications program around the impact these accomplishments have had on your customers, and readers will engage with your content.

We are embarking on a special project in a couple of weeks. We plan to interview key contacts at the utilities we serve and interview them for individual feature stories. As WordSouth celebrates 20 years, we will turn the spotlight on our clients to celebrate their careers, their accomplishments and their thoughts on the industries they serve. These features stories will appear in a special section on our website, and we will also share them across our social media channels.

3. **Have fun.** Everyone is looking for a party, right? I know, you have a few customers who wouldn't be happy if you gave them free service for life. But aside from them, people generally enjoy having fun. Look for ways to take your milestone celebration beyond the expected. Your customers are more likely to engage with your message if you have some fun with it.



(click for larger image)

Instead of slapping a “20th Anniversary” ribbon on our website and calling it a day, we decided to frame the milestone as a birthday. There are so many ways we can apply the idea of a birthday celebration to our 20-year mark. For instance, recently we mailed a MoonPie and a party blower/noisemaker to clients in several states. We included a simple card in the package (click on thumbnail to see larger image) that thanked them for being part of our story. It was a simple, clever way to share a piece of “in lieu of birthday cake” with them, and we received several emails thanking us for the snack and fun mailer.

4. **Go the distance.** It's easy to run a “celebrating 70 years” ad in the local newspaper, or place a message on the bottom of your bill. But with a little effort and planning, you can make the celebration last all year long. You don't have to hold a major event every month to keep the momentum going. In fact, you can incorporate the celebration into activities that are already on your calendar, such as customer appreciation events, Earth Day activities and school demonstrations. Make sure all your advertising mentions the milestone. Ask the city to issue a proclamation. Hold contests through your bill and across your social media channels.

At WordSouth, we are planning several activities (some small, some large) to make the party last all year long. One of the biggest involves StoryConnect, our annual conference for utility communicators. This year's event, scheduled for September in Chattanooga, will be framed as one big birthday party (and yes, there will be cake).

Get the most out of your celebration opportunities by applying these principles to your communications plan. Your customers will enjoy it, and the positive energy you'll generate will be too valuable to measure. Now go plan your party!

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