

Who Said the “S” Word?
Sustainability in the Midst of Chaos

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As our climate changes and water resources deplete, it is imperative for water and wastewater organizations to develop strategic plans to ensure sustainability 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. At this point in time, the current situation that we are facing with our water resources is already compromising the needs of future generations. Without dedication to resolving the problem through environmental stewardship, the needs of the future may become irrelevant.

To accomplish sustainability, a public utility must first have a commitment to the cause. Then a strong organizational identity must be developed within its community with a commitment to educate its stakeholders about the organization and the impact each individual has on the preservation of our future resources. Developing innovative communications strategies can build this relationship and educate customers, public offices and other community stakeholders. Using these tools to increase public involvement will make great strides towards 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 websites are vital components of a strong communications plan. Additionally, 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 set goals with measurable results for the campaign. Define your agenda (i.e. overall water conservation; increase environmental stewardship efforts in the community; become an advocate 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 study by the United State Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (2005), they asked the question “What hinders people and organizations from adopting stewardship behaviors?” Through research with various stakeholders and organizations dedicated to sustainability, their findings showed 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, can assist in the success of your campaign. Initiate programs that the community and your employees can participate in with the intent of sustainable solutions. 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 cannot recreate, only preserve.

There are four key areas that 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.

Strengthen Your Organizational Identity

It is imperative that you define how you want your customers to perceive you. Make your message known and don't allow other people or organizations define you. Be clear, unique and consistent in your messaging from your logo to all of 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 of the problem, and understanding leads to a solution for sustainability.

Develop a Communications Plan: Internal & External

Taking the time to understand your customers and to build their confidence in your organization is vital in successfully 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 who is 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 what their role is 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, who 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 how you are a key component in the future of your community. 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 continuously includes a section on sustainability and tips that stakeholders can use to participate in the initiative.

Encourage customers and employees to suggest other environmental programs that 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 for your organization. These avenues provide you with the opportunity to spread your message and boost confidence in your organization. Through these types of media your message can be quickly spread 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 who dedicate themselves to, or who 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 in the efforts to protect our water. Send them regular communication in the mail or through online resources. Build your relationship with them and remind them about your organization and your goals.

Establish a Strong PR Campaign and 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 area 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 and 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 assist in demonstrating the importance of your message. Offer tours to businesses, schools, universities and community organizations and not only use it 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 other organizations or 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 along the way. 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 to other organizations.

Conclusion

Once you have developed a cohesive strategy and implemented a communications plan to educate your stakeholders, continue to engage your community on the topic of sustainability. Encourage them 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 organizations 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 will not only bring positive light to your organization, but will also increase community awareness and participation. All progress begins with one drop in the bucket, but all of 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, DC: U.S.