Communication Without Words: How Utilities Can Become Visible to Their Customers

With a solid understanding of how we humans decide whether to buy something, Apple continues to excite our emotions, even with something as simple as earbuds. Before Apple introduced its earbuds, these small, unobtrusive hearing devices were black—visually boring as they blended into the background. But they worked, and we never gave them a second thought, until Apple made them white. It was no accident that they were white and not black. Apple doesn’t develop product features merely to meet communication needs; it ambushes our emotions on several levels. And if you don’t need a product (would the world end if you didn’t own earbuds, white or black?), if it does not fill some unquenchable requirement in your life, how else can you justify a purchase save by emotion?
MARKETING TO EMOTIONS

Yep. Unlike water utilities, Apple offers us products we don’t need—but boy, do we want them. Said former Apple marketing executive Steve Chazin, “Those white iPod headphones were not designed by engineers—they are a pure Apple marketing trick designed to make the visible part of the product a status system. Wear white headphones, and you are a member of the club” (Chazin 2007).

So Apple leveraged pure marketing genius and created a status niche. It did not compromise quality by doing so. But these white earbuds were a visible sign of coolness, an emotional acknowledgment that, yes, my everyday life is relevant; I stand out from the crowd. Likewise, we emotionally embrace iPods, iPhones, and iEverything Else.

Make no mistake—Apple’s strategy doesn’t work if the products don’t work. But they do, and Apple doesn’t have to waste time educating us on how they work or why they’re better. Our brains work the way our brains work, most of the time. Basically we process the big-picture data and react emotionally to enticing stimuli long before parsing rational details.

So what can Apple’s marketing acuity teach us about selling water? We are starting to see water utilities tap into the basic emotions of today’s consumer by showcasing the visibility and the desirability of clean, pure water.

THE WATER TANK PROJECT

Dubious? Consider water tanks. Now, there’s nothing special about water tanks. Like black earbuds, your run-of-the-mill bucket-on-stilts water tower is largely ignored by a public that knows the tower performs a quintessentially utilitarian function: water storage.

Enter, ironically, The Big Apple (better known as New York City) and The Water Tank Project (2014). In July 2014, The Water Tank Project was unveiled, encouraging the public to emotionally embrace artistically wrapped water tanks throughout the boroughs. And by no means was the artwork “run of the mill.” It was just as they always had—no better or worse, by and large, than water tanks anywhere. And like the clever white earbuds, these “water tank canvases” evoked an emotional response; the nonprofit organization behind the effort, Word Above the Street, saw to that by making the tanks highly visible and highly admired. Same product, same function, but with a fresh, new look and a fresh, new purpose.

Word Above the Street fostered a vibrant ground game: public tours, thought-provoking events, engaging fundraisers, and an array of social media and public-outreach initiatives designed to capture the public’s fancy. In addition, the organization launched a smartphone-accessible mobile platform enabling New

From the Big Apple to the Pacific Coast, utility officials are teaming up with corporations, nonprofit organizations, and the public to promote the value of water as a precious commodity.

In Montana, the City of Bozeman promotes the benefits of tap water versus bottled water with its portable Water Bottle Fill Station, which is a regular feature at local events. Photo courtesy of City of Bozeman.
Yorkers everywhere to follow the project, view the artwork, and learn how to get involved—how to make a difference. Who knew? Water. With emotional impact.

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Also, The Water Tank Project enlisted powerful partners to raise global awareness of the need for clean water. Hearst Magazines has been the project’s exclusive media partner, with magazines like Town & Country; ELLE; Marie Claire; O, The Oprah Magazine; and Good Housekeeping running editorial features, not to mention a public service campaign touting the Gotham Center’s water tanks both in print and online. Other key partners were Swatch, Mora Water Systems, Amazon Art, Patrón, Christie’s, HP, AvalonBay, Bib & Sola, Nasdaq and Duggal.

BOZEMAN’S “WHITE EARBUDS”

Wow. “That’s some massive project,” you might think. “But we’re just a small utility. We can’t leverage that kind of firepower.” Don’t despair. You don’t need to get on Oprah’s radar to become visible to your customers. Consider the imaginative efforts of the City of Bozeman, Mont. This picturesque town of about 40,000 people has popularized its Water Bottle Fill Station, paid for in part by a local nonprofit, to showcase the pure freshness of its product—tap water (see the photograph on page 43). Tap water’s not a particularly sexy product, to be sure, but on a local scale, the home of Montana State University is making great strides in forging its own version of white earbuds.

“The new Water Bottle Fill Station was designed to be mobile so it could be visible at local events,” said city water conservation specialist Lain Leoniak. “Our goal is to provide quality tap water in an effort to open the channels of communication about the benefits of tap water over bottled water” (Leonihak 2014).

The kickoff in summer 2014 provided hundreds of gallons of city tap water to some 14,000 people at an outdoor festival. The crowd filled the equivalent of a whopping 5,680 half-liter water bottles. Leoniak said the program gained popularity over the summer. “It generated a lot of fun discussions. I think it was positively received on the whole and got people thinking about where their water comes from” (Leonihak 2014).

Cost of the program? Less than $20,000, including vinyl signage. And the Water Bottle Fill Station can be easily transported and the signage changed.

HILLSBORO’S HOMETOWN TAP

Oregon offers another example of high-visibility water. The Portland suburb of Hillsboro has introduced the Hometown Tap, a sustainable bottle- or cup-filling system tied to a unique water-chilling devi
designed and built for a nominal cost by Hillsboro Water Department operators (see the photograph on page 44). The Hometown Tap, now several years in operation, proved particularly popular on one 90-degree-plus day when more than 5,000 residents tapped into the benefits of refreshing tap water from the town’s source.

Complete with public education about quality tap water and the importance of a refillable water bottle, the Hometown Tap has been set up at multiple events and welcomes people to come and “Feel good about filling up!” The original signage for the Hillsboro tap stations was graced by the artwork of local Mooberly Elementary student Allyson Thompson.

Not only has the Hometown Tap been a hit with local event-goers; it also won a Best-in-Show award at the Pacific Northwest AWWA conference. Use of the Hometown Tap made quality tap water visible to town residents and kept thousands of single-use water bottles out of the town’s landfill (Steele 2014).

CONCLUSION

From the Big Apple to the Pacific Coast, utility officials are teaming up with corporations, nonprofit organizations, and the public to promote the value of water as a precious commodity. At the same time, utilities gain recognition for the work of their local utility services, proving it doesn’t matter what size utility you are managing or where your utility is located. Showcasing the value of “ordinary” tap water can open valuable channels of communication with your customers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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