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Marketing Professors Adjust Message, Kick-Start New Industry



Editor's note: "When Theory Meets Practice - Stories From the Workplace" features professionals who share tales of challenging events that tested them with the unexpected.

By Cathy Hartman and Edwin Stafford, Huntsman professors

One might think that a proposal to save water during a drought would be an easy sell. We discovered that it was not.

We knew that, according to theory, in the world of marketing if you aren't prepared to adjust your approach until your message connects with your audience's hearts and not just their heads, you will end up spending all of your time talking to yourself and alienating your audience. We learned that you need to understand your audience's values when framing effective marketing messages.

It was in 2003 that we joined the Utah Wind Working Group, a volunteer committee that was supported by the Utah Energy Office with funds from the U.S. Department of Energy's Wind Powering America Program. We accepted the task of promoting community acceptance of wind power in Utah to win popular support for legislation that would offer tax incentives to entrepreneurs willing to invest in renewable energy.

In the summer of 2003, Utah was suffering from a severe drought. At the time, coal-powered electricity was relatively inexpensive and the prevailing choice among policy makers even though coal plants in the west consumed 650 million gallons of water every day – a fact that few Utahns realized. Wind turbines, by contrast, don't require any water to generate power, so we decided to build our messaging around that benefit with a slogan that said, "Wind Power Saves Water!"

Our hope was to drive people to our website to learn how wind power saved water as a viable substitute for traditional coal-fired power. The campaign, however, did not generate the web traffic we had expected. In fact, it appeared that no one cared about the water-energy connection. Our campaign did, however, spark one inaccurate news story that managed to offend a utility plant executive, someone we would have rather not alienated.

We learned two lessons: One, connecting wind power to something people didn't care about is not effective marketing. And two, marketers need to consider how messages unintentionally could offend specific audiences.

As we reevaluated our campaign, searching for an approach that would resonate with Utahns, we decided to emphasize how wind farms could generate new property tax revenues (paid by the wind entrepreneurs). We reasoned that since about 75% of property taxes in Utah went to fund local schools and supported Utah kids, we could tie wind power to what most Utahns really cared about!

We started a campaign that said, "Wind Power Can Fund Schools!" The marketing pull, which included billboards, prompted thousands to go to our web site. Policymakers began supporting wind power and soon, with an almost unanimous vote, legislators passed their first significant tax incentive package for renewable energy. That market incentive led to the creation of Utah's first wind project in Spanish Fork in June of 2008.

Keep in mind the legislature had only recently voted down a bill that would have required utilities to use renewable sources of energy to generate a small percentage of their electricity. A change in attitude toward wind power was achieved.

Utahns value education and their children, but raising taxes to fund schools wasn't politically popular. At the time Utah ranked dead last in per-pupil funding of education. We tapped into that dissonance and showed how wind power could be a solution for funding schools without raising taxes. That resonated with people! Our billboard and slogan were eventually adopted by the U.S. Department of Energy and other states in their wind power outreach efforts.

The success of the campaign reminded us that good marketing often is a matter of reaching your target audiences' hearts, and not just their heads. Water conservation wasn't nearly as important to Utahns as children, schools, and taxes. Had we stubbornly refused to abandon the water conservation message our story would have had a different ending.

The idea of being flexible and fine-tuning innovative approaches is constant not just in marketing but in business in general. In our case, we let the winds of change provide some education for us. We adjusted our approach, and helped ignite a new renewable energy industry in Utah.