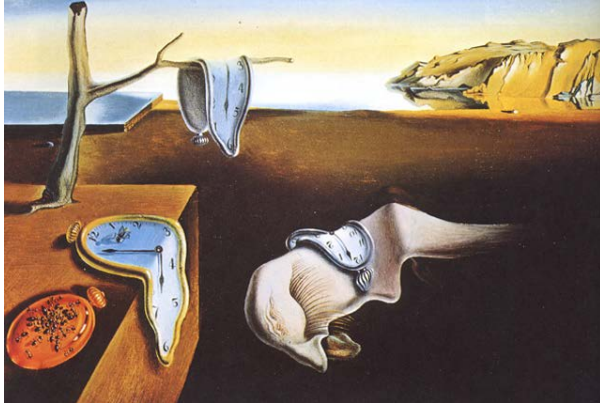


# Facts are Not Enough: Why Some Utilities Need a New Narrative

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Do you remember this painting? Prints of it have adorned college dorm rooms for decades. It's Salvador Dali's "Persistence of Memory." I wasn't an Art History major, so I'm not sure exactly what the melting clocks are supposed to signify. But the fact I remember it more than 30 years after I took it off my own dorm wall attests to the truth of the painting's title at least.

Credit: Dalipaintings.net

Yes, memory persists, even if the details or the actual facts tend to fade. Impressions formed years or decades ago remain alive and well, quietly lurking just below the surface of the conscious mind, waiting to be reawakened. As Maya Angelou once said, **"People will forget what you said or what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."**

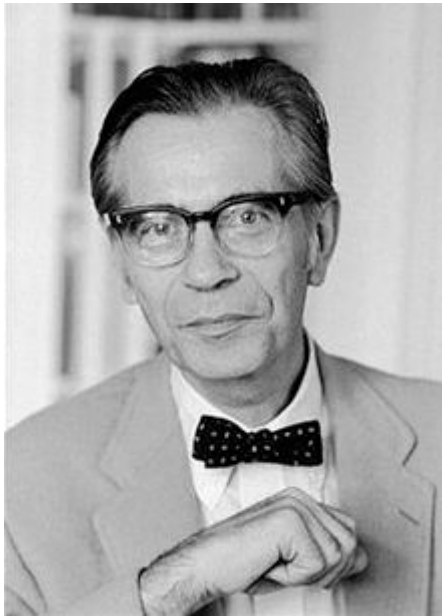
Which brings us, inexorably, to utility communications and marketing. But first, since we're in the heat of the presidential campaign, let's take a brief side trip into the minds of Donald Trump's supporters.

## When Facts Don't Fit

*The Washington Post* recently ran an interesting [article](#) on why facts don't matter to supporters of the Republican presidential candidate. Now before anyone gets all over-heated about rampant partisanship or snarky liberal elites, I believe exactly the same situation applies to supporters of Hillary Clinton.



Credit: *The National Review*



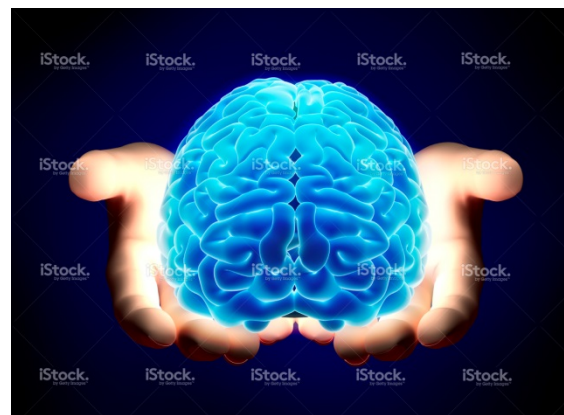
Source: Wikipedia.org

I can say that because the **exact same thing applies to me**. And, if you're honest, you're probably guilty as well. So everyone chill — this isn't a deep dive (or a partisan one) into voter demographics, psychographics or what historian Richard Hofstadter called "[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](#)." By the way, Hofstadter (left), a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian who taught at Columbia University, wrote that essay back in the early 1960s, when Donald Trump was about 17 years old. So let's all unclench and take a breath, OK?

We're talking about what social scientists call "confirmation bias." As the *Post* article explained, and some of us already knew, people have a tendency to remember facts (or even rumors) that **confirm their existing viewpoint**. Similarly, people often ignore facts or rumors that don't conform to their viewpoint.

So if you think government is inept or corporations are heartless, you will be disposed to remembering those things that buttress your point of view. Articles on governmental excellence or corporate kindness will sail right on by, undetected by those who don't believe such things are real or even possible.

**Confirmation bias is a trick our brain came up** with to help us make sense out of a really complex world. It is a rudimentary pattern-recognition system, though a deeply flawed one. Confirmation bias is the brain's attempt to order a chaotic world and uncover patterns in events others see as random.



[Credit: iStock image ID 10610352](#)

But reality is, in fact, complex and often contradictory. Government actors can be inept as well as excellent. Corporations can be cruel and kind. But our brain is overwhelmed by all those shades of grey, layers of complexity and factual diversity.

### **Focus on the Persuadables**

If we assume your customers are distributed along a bell-shaped curve, small and roughly equal portions of your customers either trust you completely or distrust you completely. Rather than trying to change the minds of customers who distrust you, I recommend communicators and marketers at [energy companies](#) focus on the persuadable middle — which could be up to 67% of your customers.

Facts alone will not be sufficient to overcome confirmation bias of the persuadable middle who rarely think about their electric or gas provider. But a **different narrative, an alternate storyline**, may be able to overcome that bias and win over those customers providing the new story is compelling, it has internal consistency, the words are buttressed by deeds and sufficient message discipline is exerted.

Research cited in *The Washington Post* article helps explain how confirmation bias can be done:

- [“The Debunking Handbook,”](#) by John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky
- [“Why Debunking Myths About Vaccines Hasn’t Convinced Dubious Parents,”](#) a 2015 *Harvard Business Review* article by Christopher Graves, chairman of Olgivy Public Relations, a global communications firm

**This reading is indispensable for energy-company communicators and marketers seeking to overcome customers’ confirmation bias.** Communicators and marketers trying to craft a new narrative about their utility need to continually tell their narrative, demonstrate its salient points with facts and actions, and keep at it.

It won't be easy or fast to overcome whatever confirmation bias your customers may be feeling. But focused, sustained actions and communications can get the job done.

### Confirmation Bias: An Insidious Beat

Here's a real-life, first-person example of **my confirmation bias**. The University of Colorado football team's reputation has been soiled for over a decade by bad behavior off the field by a small percentage of its players. In an effort to reclaim a positive image in the community, the head coach organized a program to [donate bone marrow](#) to needy recipients. The story received positive coverage from several local media outlets, stirring my wish that the long-hoped-for cultural change was taking hold.



Credit: Bonfils Blood Center

But that fragile hope was dashed the next day when a story broke that two members of the football team were [arrested for stealing](#) electronics and prescription pain pills from another student's dorm room.



Credit: Boulder *Daily Camera*

This was only the most recent instance of bad off-the-field behavior by members of the school's football team, the Buffaloes. So when the two football players were arrested (one is shown at left), I thought, "Same old CU football players: thugs, miscreants and sociopaths," even though I knew the vast majority of CU football players have gone through their time in Boulder without breaking any laws or getting their names in the daily crime report.

You see how confirmation bias is an insidious beast?

## What's in it for Electric and Gas Providers?

A comment I heard years ago from a customer of a Southwestern utility answers that question. Asked to describe how she felt about her utility, she said, **“I’ve always hated them — I don’t know why, I just did.”** I shared that story in a [blog post](#) last year, along with the happy ending where the utility eventually was able to regain the trust of that customer and others who shared her confirmation bias.

So if you had a high-profile [safety accident](#), a corporate scandal, poor reliability, multiple [price](#) increases or a history of bad customer relations, you may need to craft a completely new narrative about your utility. **Isolated facts won’t work**; you will need to show customers how these facts are part of a **larger pattern**, a storyline that is new, different and relevant to them.

It should go without saying, but I’ll say it to be sure: **The new narrative can’t just be spin**. It needs to be based in reality. Saying the moon is made of green cheese doesn’t make it so, no matter how earnestly and frequently you say it is.

### Case in Point: Aquila

Or you can risk going the way of Aquila, the Midwestern utility that [disappeared from the landscape](#) a while back after a prolonged period of managerial arrogance. The company talked a good game, but its leaders’ actions undercut that narrative. Over time, and despite the effort of the company’s communicators, Aquila’s narrative became, in effect, “the rules don’t apply to us.”



**Looking back, its former CEO Richard Green told *The Kansas City Star*, “The biggest mistake we made was we didn’t listen to and respect our neighbors.”**

Don't make Aquila's mistake! Utilities need to continuously show by the deed, more than the word, they are providing a vital service affordably and safely, and then go the extra mile to show the community they contribute to protecting the environment and enhancing the community's quality of life. Utility communicators and marketers need to actively and continually shape their company's narrative accordingly.

### Try Something New — Like These Peers

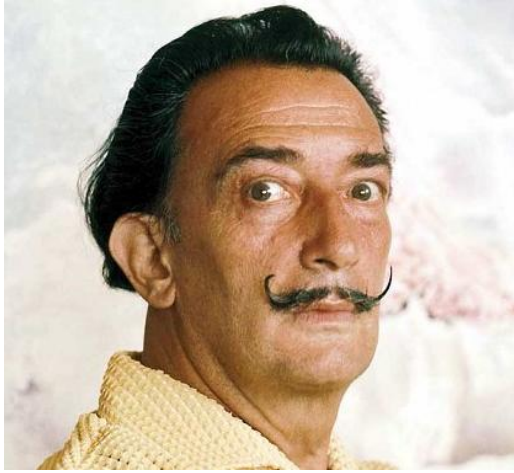
You may be able to create a new narrative, or reinforce an existing positive one, with a dramatic, creative idea, like KUA's [Movie in the Park](#).

Roseville Environmental Utilities (REU) [picks up household hazardous wastes](#) at a customer's home at no charge. Twice a year REU teams up with police agencies for **Pharmaceutical Take-Back Days** where residents can drop off their unused and unneeded medication, rather than pour it down the toilet or put it in the trash.

These are acts that go above and beyond what most customers would expect from their utilities. They are memorable and they contribute meaningfully to customers' positive perceptions of those utilities. Could your utility's reputation be burnished by these kinds of customer-centered acts? The kinds of acts that can overcome customer feelings of "meh" and turn stakeholders into advocates?

Customers live in the here and now, and they use confirmation bias to filter reality and make sense of complexity. Communicators and marketing professionals at electric and gas companies can step outside their own biases with market research that shows how their customers view them.

You want to place your utility in **that part of the customer's mental geography reserved for trusted companies**. Once there, providing that bias is buttressed with evidence, your lives will be a lot easier.



Credit: [antonioluis.pozuelo.org](http://antonioluis.pozuelo.org)

Salvador Dali (left) was a few decades ahead of his colleagues in the social sciences when he painted the “Persistence of Memory.” His painting is yet another example of art preceding science. Communicators and marketers can and should use art and science to mold and manage your customers’ perceptions. Or you can wait for those who wish you ill to do it, in ways you may not like. One thing’s for sure: it will be done.