



## Short Takes and Quick Hits for Utility Communicators ©

January 2017 Subscriber Exclusive

If you attend enough conferences, you're bound to pick up some golden nuggets that you may want to try implementing at your electric, gas or water employer. You could call these "Ideas Worth Stealing." I had a heavier than normal travel schedule during the second half of 2016, which means I picked up more than the usual amount of golden nuggets.

On their own, any of these nuggets may not merit a full-on blog post or Subscriber Exclusive. But I wanted to share these ideas with subscribers to *EEC Perspectives*. If you implement one or more of these ideas, please let me know how it went at your utility, OK? And if you attended different conferences and picked up different golden nuggets, please share those too — maybe we can use them, with attribution, in a future "Short Takes and Quick Hits" piece.



### **Location, Location, Location:**

That's the first rule of real estate, right? It applies to utilities too, though not in the way you might think. Utilities have an ongoing need to engage with their stakeholders. Staying in touch with your communities can lower friction with them. When conducting stakeholder engagement, the choice of venue is important. While the default option might be to hold open house meetings at your headquarters, have you considered holding those outreach sessions in places the public might feel more comfortable — at a high school gym, for example, or the office of a local human service organization?

“We tried holding public outreach meetings at our headquarters, but no one ever came,” Alice Dietz, communication and public relations manager for Washington’s Cowlitz Public Utility District, told us. **“But now that we’re speaking at meetings held at a ‘neutral’ location, like a Lion’s or Elks or Rotary club location, we’re reaching far more people, and that’s led to much better engagement. It’s always better to meet at a place where people feel comfortable.”**

With Alice’s encouragement, Cowlitz PUD’s general manager or a board member now speak at about 20 local service club meetings per year. The GM also attends another dozen or so of those meetings annually to network. Alice told us the ‘go to their turf’ strategy is working well: “It has improved how the community views us, and that affects their willingness to work with us.”

“Even if you just speak at one Rotary Club meeting, you’re going to meet more members of the public than if you hold meetings at your headquarters,” she continued. “As monopolies, utilities are in a unique situation. **We may be the only game in town, but we still need to break down barriers and show our communities a human face.**”



Credit: Cowlitz PUD

**Organizational Change:** “One thing about organizational change — you will make mistakes. Don’t let the fear of not getting it exactly right the first time stop you from making the changes that are necessary. Organizations don’t change unless people do.”

So said John DeStasio, former general manager at the Sacramento Municipal Utility District. He should know: he led that utility on an extended brand journey a few years back, and that journey led to many organizational changes.



That approach is very straightforward and perfectly logical. But it risks burying the lead, as journalists say.

The next time you speak at an industry conference, try differentiating your talk from others by proceeding in this fashion:

- 1) Begin by showing how your customers have benefitted from a product or service you are marketing. Begin with the end in mind, as Stephen Covey wrote in [\*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People\*](#).**
- 2) Then describe the features of the good or services that created benefits for your customers, including the internal process changes involved in bringing it to market.**
- 3) End with a summary of how the successful marketing of this product or service has helped your utility achieve a longstanding goal, such as boosting customer satisfaction, increasing program enrollments or making your utility into a trusted energy provider.**

In a previous [blog](#), I invoked former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, who once said, “The trouble with PowerPoint is, usually there’s no power and no point.” Don’t make that mistake the next time you speak at a conference! Engage the audience with stories. Find a way to get in their shoes. Ask about their experiences. What are the three things you want them to remember about your talk when they get back to the office? More is not always better.

Before building your next conference presentation, watch this video, and sin no more.



URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU48-FVqvQ>

**Charting Our Course for 2017 and Beyond:** Our ongoing challenge of communicating with and marketing to stakeholders in ways that balance cost and effectiveness has taken on new importance. The cost of failure gets higher with each passing year.

Five years ago, when conference speakers said consumers would be judging utilities' performance against industry leaders like Amazon.com, FedEx and Zappos, some thought that was an over-heated prediction. But that prediction has become market reality. What will be the dominant reality for providers of electricity, natural gas and water in 2022? Find out by attending conferences this year!