

To engage the public about safety, utilities need to do what they do best: Drive continuous improvement and create a positive customer experience.

BY BRENNAN CULVER

SHIFTING SAFETY INTO HIGH GEAR

Utilities are expanding public outreach and educational initiatives about safety to help continue to improve service to customers. With safety as a top priority and expectations from regulators and the public increasing dramatically, these public awareness activities are being evaluated with more scrutiny. Utilities must be able to provide metrics that demonstrate effectiveness and impacts, not just report on activity.

Utilities excel at operational improvement, and you can easily apply the same approach to public safety communications as you do to other critical areas of your business, namely, by driving continuous improvement and creating a positive customer experience.

While all natural gas utilities have their primary outreach programs in place—such as pipeline public awareness plans for excavators, emergency officials, public officials and the affected public—today, continuous improvement demands more.

To apply your utility's continuous improvement skills and experience to public safety, focus on three strategies: Consider the customer, follow the data, and track and benchmark for a strategic advantage.

CONSIDER THE CUSTOMER

As a utility, you know how to deliver memorable messages such as “Call Before You Dig” that avoid industry jargon. Why not apply this knowledge to all public safety messages, keeping in mind that your target audience is likely to be broad and diverse? Developing the most appropriate channels of communication with your target at-risk audiences will enable you to best serve your customers as their preferences and needs change. Here

are tactics to help get the right message to the right target audience at the right time:

- **Explore segmentation:** Look at claims data and primary research to identify trends, including firmographics, demographics and psychographics. Then, deepen your target audience segmentation—from list development to imagery and messaging—to have the greatest impact.
- **Consider an integrated approach:** If you are a dual-commodity utility, consider including electrical safety messages with your natural gas hazard awareness and safety messaging. Your customer doesn't differentiate. And neither do litigators and auditors.
- **Choose the right channel:** The popularity of email, social media and online bill pay options is growing—but not across the board for all types of messages. Using primary research to understand how safety information is likely to be used helps to identify the most appropriate communication means. For example, many at-risk workers use safety information during on-site training sessions and thus prefer printed materials.
- **At-risk audiences:** Your target audience lists should include those most likely to come into contact with your utility. Consider input from all stakeholder business units and your regulators and insurers as well as those who operate in your territory.
- **Delivery rate:** Distribute your communications via channels that will allow you to demonstrate that your information is reaching its intended audience.
- **Response rate:** To show that people are truly engaging with your outreach, build in response mechanisms, such as the ability to request more safety resources, ask questions and provide feedback.
- **Market research:** Use your communications as an opportunity to gather primary research data on your at-risk audiences. For example, ask them how many people they provide training for, what their safety needs are and what they think about your utility.
- **Tracking and benchmarking:** When you track the effectiveness of your safety communications against your starting point and benchmark your performance against others in the industry, you can then take advantage of the many strategic opportunities that arise.

FOLLOW THE DATA

Utilities measure and report on all kinds of operational key performance indicators, including employee safety metrics, but are sometimes stumped when it comes to quantifying public safety. Common questions are: *How do we measure the success of prevention-based public safety communications?* and *How do we prove prevention?* Here are types of data collection and reporting that can demonstrate the impacts of safety communications:

TRACK AND BENCHMARK FOR A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Tracking how your own program performance results compare over time and how your performance compares with others can reveal some powerful findings.

For example, we've compared performance and customer opinion metrics of companies that invested in baseline-only communications against companies that took their compliance activities to the next

level with an integrated approach to public safety across key at-risk audiences. The results were staggering, with customer perceptions of integrated and strategic communications utilities coming in 15 to 25 percent higher than baseline-only utilities. This kind of data is persuasive when developing a business case for a public safety program or defending an existing program investment when budgets are being cut.

Once you have started, keep in mind that your public safety performance can drive a variety of key performance indicators. Consider the following:

- **Choose your performance indicators wisely:** When you choose your key performance indicators, think about your stakeholders. For example, customer satisfaction may not be operations' top concern, but you can be certain that safety's impact on customer satisfaction is something that your leadership will be interested in. In fact, according to an industry-focused customer impact report by J.D. Power in October 2013 (<http://bit.ly/1NjmZwN>), a positive correlation exists between robust public safety outreach and community stewardship

satisfaction. Other research has corroborated that customer opinion of a utility is higher among those who receive valuable and useful safety materials than those who don't.

- **Leverage public safety to your company's benefit:** Management knows that higher customer satisfaction ratings result in measurable increases on a company's return on equity and can help meet rate case objectives. Utilities that demonstrate their commitment to public safety and report on the effectiveness of their safety communications see positive results in regulatory audits, claims, legal decisions and general rate cases.

Taking your public safety program to the next level will deliver a strategic advantage and maximize the benefits to stakeholders and the community. Just do what you already know how to do—and do well: Drive continuous improvement. ♦

Brennan Culver is the principal at Culver Company and has more than 30 years' experience in designing public safety programs for utilities.



NEXT MONTH

NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

What do a medical marijuana farm, a cruise ship and a locomotive have in common? It's not a joke—these are just a few examples of the new market opportunities being created thanks to an abundance of natural gas.

DAMAGE PREVENTION

Who you gonna call? When it comes to damage prevention, more consumers and excavators are calling 811 due to concerted efforts by natural gas utilities. Several utilities have launched unique programs to educate the public to “Call Before You Dig” and are working to streamline communication between locators and excavators.

PROFILE:

NGVAMERICA'S MATT GODLEWSKI

With more than 20 years' experience as a lobbyist in the automobile industry, Matt Godlewski is in the perfect position to lead NGVAmerica during a transformative time. One year into his new role, he talks to *American Gas* about challenges and opportunities, his work in promoting incentives for the deployment of natural gas vehicles and what he sees for the future of natural gas transportation.

AD INDEX

A.Y. McDonald Mfg. Co.	Back	PowerPlan Inc.	21
Bascom Turner Instruments	27	Reef Industries	17
Gas Technology Institute	14	Ryder System Inc.	11
Holland Engineering Inc.	18	S&N Communications Inc.	13
Itron Inc.	Inside Back	ULC Robotics	20
Marsh Bellofram Group of Companies	Inside Front	Utility Pipeline LTD	18
Michels Corporation	10	Youngstown Glove Co.	3

American Gas advertisers support your association. AGA members and associates are **in bold type**.