



Enhancing Utility Brand Equity Through Effective Customer Experience Management

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Cross-functional integration for utility-sponsored energy efficiency initiatives varies; some initiatives are highly integrated with multiple utility departments working collaboratively to achieve energy efficiency goals that align with the corporate vision, while others are characterized by energy efficiency initiatives working independently with little inter-departmental coordination. Although each utility department has different goals, functions, and thought orientations, there is one common purpose that utilities share across departments --to provide an excellent product and service to customers. Unfortunately, the lack of cross-functional coordination in some utilities often results in a fragmented and inconsistent customer experience that negatively impacts energy efficiency programs, results in lost opportunities for delivering an excellent customer experience, and erodes brand equity.

Delivering a consistent brand message at every point of interaction is one of branding's primary tenets. A brand is defined as everything you see, think, touch, or feel about a product or company. A brand is not the name of the company or a logo or an advertising campaign. It is an emotional and cognitive connection between the customer and the organization or product. The status and relevance of a brand is constantly being negotiated during daily interactions between the company and customer and requires active management. Positive experiences benefit brand equity while negative experiences erode it.

Customers interact with energy efficiency programs through a significant number of communication channels and points along the value chain. Without active management of program portfolios and integration with corporate communications departments during the design and planning phases, brands can quickly become inconsistent and fragmented. For a single program, the points of communication with customers seem simple and manageable. But imagine coordinating messages for over 20 programs with multiple consulting companies and participating contractors and even more communication channels. For example, utilities often allow their energy efficiency programs to develop individual marketing campaigns with program-specific websites and URLs. If five energy efficiency programs run radio ads directing customers to five different URLs but all use the utility's name in the ad, would the customer be confused? Add the utility's corporate advertising and community initiatives into the messaging mix and the brand is further fragmented, causing confusion and negatively impacting brand equity.

There are, however, a few strategies to consider when designing energy efficiency initiatives that will help utilities achieve energy efficiency goals while enhancing brand equity.

Who's Minding the Brand? The first strategy to ensuring a positive customer experience is one of human capital. Who is minding the brand? Assigning someone to manage the cross-functional brand integration is key. The most logical candidate is the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) and the corporate communications department. Assigning an energy efficiency brand manager to coordinate with the corporate communications department will help facilitate the integration of energy efficiency messages with the utility's brand. Aristotle said that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This statement rings true for marketing and communications. Designing, managing, and implementing a coordinated communications campaign and leveraging initiatives across departments will provide utilities with more consistency, exposure, and brand awareness than each department's individual marketing efforts. Corporate communications should be involved in energy efficiency initiatives during the planning phase because energy efficiency programs are essentially new product offerings. This structure enables mutual support for the corporate communications and energy efficiency departments.

Integration Across Communication Channels. The second strategy focuses on integration across communication channels and touch points. Typically, one considers customer service and call centers, consultants, and contractors when implementing customer experience plans. But there are other areas of unrealized potential that may be considered. Most companies conduct community relation initiatives and charitable giving strategies to improve the communities they serve. These initiatives are typically conducted in partnership with community-based organizations and are not considered opportunities for cross-promotion with external initiatives, specifically energy efficiency initiatives. However, significant opportunities exist to strengthen partnerships with these community organizations and to leverage their network for mutually beneficial goals. A utility can realize the leveraging effects of its relationship with a community organization by tapping into the organization's ready-made network. The community organization becomes a channel to market energy efficiency programs to its customers; its customers receive education and financial benefits; and the utility achieves its energy efficiency goals. This partnership builds the utility's brand equity.

Educational institutions are also key stakeholders for most utilities. It is not uncommon for a single school or district to participate in a utility's energy efficiency program, student education program, and safety initiative. Each of these programs requires a different contact at the school—from a teacher or principal to a facilities manager. There is a great opportunity for the utility to reinforce its commitment to the school and community by demonstrating both the school's efforts and the utility's efforts. A simple letter to the superintendent or school newsletter thanking the district for its participation with an illustration of the financial savings, energy savings, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions can go a long way in enhancing the customers' experience, building relationships, and strengthening brand equity. Implementing this strategy is simply a matter of data mining and coordination among the energy efficiency, corporate communications, and customer relations departments.

Brand Guidelines and Guideline Implementation. The third strategy is to create guidelines, tools, and trainings to ensure that marketing and program materials are on-brand and customer friendly. Internal preparedness initiatives prior to program launch and regular meetings and formal updates throughout the program life will facilitate the flow of information within and across departments. But preparation is not enough. Brands require ongoing management. Therefore, the development and management of mechanisms to maintain materials and keep employees, implementers, and contractors informed of company initiatives is important and will contribute to consistent brand delivery.

Related to brand maintenance is measuring brand awareness and advertising effectiveness. Developing cross-functional strategies to measure customer satisfaction, brand awareness, and marketing effectiveness is critical to gaining an accurate understanding of how customers perceive your brand and their experiences with it. This information will allow utilities to identify areas of concern, tailor messaging, and develop new products or services.

Ultimately, a positive customer experience and increased brand equity boil down to two key elements: 1) actively managing the brand to ensure integrated, coordinated, and consistent messaging at every channel and touch point, 2) empowering utility employees, consultants, and contractors to be brand champions through adequate training and tools. I hope that this discussion has sparked a few ideas on how energy efficiency departments can contribute to improved customer experiences and contribute to building and maintaining great brands.