Winning Positive Publicity

By Linda K. Rader

Staying ‘on message’ to both promote a corporate image and disseminate positive brand awareness can be challenging, even in the best of times. Companies successfully doing it this year deserve special recognition.

Phoenix-based Salt River Project (SRP) was named the “Communicator of the Year” at Utility Communicators International’s annual conference in New Orleans, at which Ann Brown, SRP’s advertising and brand management manager, collected 15 separate honors (see complete list below). Incredibly, all four of SRP’s major 2001 public relations/image campaigns were honored: “Energy Savings Solutions,” “Value to Community,” “EarthWise Energy” (environmental), and safety.

Why SRP? Cynics who try to argue that public power companies don’t struggle with the same monumental challenges as investor-owned utilities might consider a few current hurdles facing SRP: geographic location, potential power shortages due to drought, and issues dealing with security, the environment, cultural diversity as well as an increasingly transient population.

Arizona is nothing less than geographically challenged in its proximity to California and all of its energy woes. SRP serves both Phoenix, the sixth-largest city in the nation, and in a post 9/11 world, manages Palo Verde, the nation’s largest nuclear facility.

As for continuing drought conditions, “There’s not a lot of water in Arizona,” said Brown. “We’ve had four consecutive dry winters and are now having a very dry summer.” Area residents, however, have seen these conditions before and survived. It was, after all, following a similar drought situation at the turn of the last century that inspired the founding of SRP in 1903.

“Farmers moved there and there was no water,” said Brown, “so they built the Roosevelt Dam (and intricate canal systems) to provide water for the Phoenix metropolitan valley from the snow runoff.” When there’s no snow, there’s no runoff, and that affects both SRP’s advertising and public relations campaigns.

“Hey, we live in the desert, so let’s try to use water wisely,” Brown said of one campaign, “or at least try not to waste it.” Each short spot ended with suggestions for saving water or power. Brown personally followed up on one idea that suggested using shower timers. “I have a teen-aged boy at home who likes to take long, long, showers,” she said, “and by gosh if he didn’t get out of the shower in exactly five minutes. I was shocked.” If the truly humorous spots, collaborations of SRP with Phoenix-based ad agency Cramer-Krasselt, keep people laughing, smiling, and remaining loyal, why argue with success? SRP also teamed with the local Lowe’s store to pass out conservation tips and materials.

SRP’s “Value to Community” campaign, which Brown termed “calming, caring ads,” won three separate top honors. “It revolved around and exudes our employees giving back to the community,” said Brown. Statistics back up her statement. In SRP’s 2001 annual report, “Value to the Valley” (3rd place winner for companies with fewer than 750,000 customers), “…more than 75% of Valley residents say SRP is ‘heavily involved’ in the local community. This is particularly compelling in view of the fact that nearly one-third of all residents have lived in the area for five years or less.” The ads showed company employees who also volunteer in the community, such as a customer service manager who helps as an animal rescue worker or computer technicians who volunteers for the Andre House evening meals program or SRP’s annual holiday food drive. The company continued this set of ads after 9/11 for their serenity and calming effects.

Brown made the switch from an ad agency to SRP based on the recommendation of a personal acquaintance. “I thought it would be fun to sink my teeth into one product category project instead of representing a whole lot of clients.” That was 10 years ago. As many smaller utilities do not get much exposure in the national media, Brown learned to wear many hats and operate with few resources. “It’s tough,” said Brown, “because we don’t have a product you can see. It’s not tangible. But our leaders allowed us to take some creative license—which doesn’t always happen in this industry.”

Brown acknowledged the company is forced in some years to spend more money based on current issues. “Last year we had a lot of production because one of our goals was to improve image,” she said, but noted last year’s production budget was amortized over multiple years. “All we did this summer was add the newspaper component. We didn’t have to produce any television. That’s where the costs are.” Besides, she said, some ads are summer-only, “so we don’t have the wear-out rate an annualized campaign might have had.”

That creativity also surfaced in a bright and graphically bold campaign for M-Power (pay-as-you-go) for which SRP teamed with Motorola. The predominately Hispanic agency Arvizu Advertising and PromotionGraphic custom-designed materials for SRPs Hispanic customers.

“We were looking at it from the consumer’s perspective and asking ourselves what they’d best respond to or grab from a brochure rack in a business office or at a trade show (the two main distribution channels). The result was a striking blend of color and bold graphics for ‘Guia de uso de energia’ or ‘Opciones de cobro y pagos’. The same message was also acculturated for other markets using different eye-catching graphics, such as showing a pay center in use, said Brown, who has since fielded numerous inquiries into that campaign from other companies.

To naysayers who claim the only companies who win are those that throw massive budgets into every campaign, Brown made one confession. “We had an unexpectedly high response for our safety message on a very low budget project,” she said.

In the end, the point of sending a message is to gain a response. If SRP can create a winning ad on a low budget, so can others. A complete review of the UCI awards will appear in the September/October issue of P&GM.