
REFLECTIONS

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Images: Public and Self

Among professionals in the field, there is a fair amount of fretting about the public image of local water supplies. Current opinion has it that public confidence in water supply has weakened, even withered. The steady surge in sales of bottled water and home water treatment devices seems to prove the point, and so does the tacit public approval of governmental measures to regulate more and more constituents of drinking water. Publications of environmental organizations and the general news media provide a steady supply of food for doubt. The quality of drinking water is increasingly suspect, at the very time most utilities are doing a better job than ever before.

In some quarters, there is a tendency to dismiss this public concern as unfounded. That reaction misses the point. Unfounded public opinion is public opinion still, and it must be reckoned with. The danger of ignoring unfavorable public opinion is compounded when accompanied by a refusal to admit that certain concerns about water quality merit serious attention.

The professional's concern about microbiological contamination is clearly more pressing than the public's concern about two parts per billion of some obscure chemical. Countering the latter does not require us to treat the former as

(read "jargon") we have adopted in talking about our work. During the last few decades we have followed the popular trend of referring to public water service as an industry. Can you think of a profession that has not succumbed to this practice? It has become commonplace

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to refer to the news industry, the health services industry, the fund-raising industry, the hair-styling industry, the dog-training industry, the recreation industry, the child-care industry, and so on through countless services and activities that are not industries according to the original meaning of the word.

One supposes this usage originated as a means of building a sense of unity among those involved in a given service, of lending a sense of size and importance to the activity. Inescapably, however, the word "industry" carries with it other connotations, including the notion of large, impersonal, profit-oriented enterprises. The practice may be a harmless affectation in most cases, but in ours it may not be advantageous.

It might be a wiser tack for us to restore the idea that providing drinking water is essentially and primarily a public service. Even investor-owned water utilities are, like their counterparts in electric power, operated in the public interest as a public service, which explains why they are publicly regulated.

Water is the quintessential public service, absolutely necessary to the health and survival of humanity and to the operation of our towns, cities, industries, and agriculture. It detracts nothing from steel, textiles, foodstuffs, chemicals, and other commodities to recognize the unique importance of water as the public service, sine qua non. The truth implied in this notion is that providing

public water supply is not first and foremost a business, an industry like any other; it is rather a service whose workers join together to provide for themselves and their communities through a designated, publicly controlled agency.

This is a subtle distinction, but the difference between a public service and any given industry is an important one to preserve in the minds of the people.

Similarly, our use of the word "product" in referring to finished water conveys the idea that what we produce is just another item among many. Widgets, winches, housewares, hardware, water—they are all products. Here again, this usage is innocent enough and well intended, but it conveys the notion that we compare our output to that of any factory, mine, or assembly line.

In itself, "product" has no negative connotation, but it fails to communicate the concern for public health protection that underlies our treatment, monitoring, and operational practices. Because water must be safe for consumption, food preparation, and various hygienic uses, it must be—and be seen to be—treated and distributed in ways that safeguard the consumer's health. Lumping water with all other products does not carry that message to the public.

I confess I am guilty of using these words in my own writing and speaking. They serve as a convenient shorthand in getting things said, and, after all, the world will not end if the practice continues. Nevertheless, I think it is in our best interest to reinforce in the public mind that water service is a public service, carried out by professionals who are keenly aware of the public trust vested in them.

The best way to ensure that our public image is correct is to ensure that our self-image is correct. Employees and managers of water utilities should not lose sight of the fact that their work is a public trust, essential to the public health and welfare.

Water service is a great responsibility, a high calling that should not be buried under the routine of daily operations; this is the central truth of what we are all about. If we are not consciously motivated by the notion of public service, then indeed we have become just another industry with another product to sell. □

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if it, too, were trivial. To do so would be irresponsible. Our commitment to safe drinking water compels us to a constant, vigilant response to every real and potential threat to public health. This posture, which must be genuine, is fundamental to maintaining public confidence.

A more subtle factor in shaping our public image might well be the language