Pepco doesn’t understand public relations

I think I finally figured out why Pepco has such a bad image: the company does not “get” public relations. The company seems to believe that advertising alone can build a positive image, while failing to realize that most people differentiate between bought advertising and the third-party endorsement that comes from a public relations program.

If we look at the past month, we have not seen a single positive sign from Pepco. The latest news, out today, is that Pepco is complaining that the reduced rate hike that it is getting from the Maryland Public Service Commission won’t be enough to sustain “improvements.” Read the article in the Washington Post here.What we have seen is a large advertising campaign designed to tell people that Pepco responded well to the derecho storm (in spite of ample evidence to the contrary).

Pepco understands that it must have a spokesperson to answer questions, but it does not seem to get that the spokesperson must tell the truth and not minimize the suffering caused by prolonged power outages (which is exactly what Thomas Graham continuously does). As Robert McCartney, columnist for the Washington Post puts it: “A slip of tongue reveals Pepco’s contempt for its customers.”

Public relations, according to BusinessDictionary.com, is the practice of creating and maintaining goodwill among an organization’s publics, through the use of such tactics as media relations, sponsorships and charitable contributions.

As far as I can see, Pepco is not doing a good job at creating or maintaining goodwill. It is failing at public relations (and in my opinion, it is also failing at advertising). More

troubling is that the company seems to not care what the public thinks. It seems to believe that if it places enough advertising, the public will believe that it is working hard and improving reliability. As I have said before, the public will only believe that Pepco is working hard– at advertising– unless changes are made that affect them directly (better communication, faster restoration times, indeed, increased reliability).

Pepco–how about you hire someone who "gets" public relations? Perhaps with some wise PR counsel you will improve your image by actually making steps that do increase goodwill.

UPDATE

Tom Graham has this letter to the editor in Wednesday's Washington Post. I quote:

> *Critics can say many things about the company and about me, but to question our care and concern for our customers is simply unfair. This is my home, these are my people, and they are – and will remain – my utmost professional priority.*

Do you think this rings true? Is the charge unfair? Moreover, do you think this was a good move on Graham's part?