

Has Pepco changed its communication strategy?

Last week, when we were waiting for Hurricane Sandy to hit, my main worry was losing power. Because the storm was predicted many days out, Pepco was actually ready, with out-of-state assets in place. Pepco also warned it could take a week or more to restore power (managing expectations?) Thankfully, Montgomery County was spared the worst of storm, and although some customers did lose power, the majority did not. Of course, New Jersey and New York were hit pretty badly and are still struggling to get power restored.

Detailed preparedness plan, communicated

Pepco seemed to go to great pains to communicate exactly how it was prepared to deal with the storm (participated in mutual aid calls, got repair crews in place, and so forth). Prior to the storm, every customer received a robocall warning to be prepared.

More faces of Pepco

I noticed that prior to the storm, Pepco held a couple of news conferences. Instead of featuring Tom Graham, Pepco's regional president, who was everywhere during the Derecho coverage, Pepco featured David Velazquez, the executive vice president for power delivery for PHI (Pepco's parent company).

Here's the video:

Different tone and trying to do the right thing

In a full page color ad placed in yesterday's Sunday Washington Post, Pete Pedersen, Pepco's emergency preparedness

manager is featured (again, not Tom Graham). The headline is "Thank you for weathering the storm with us." The body of the ad seems to recognize how much suffering being without power engenders saying:

Because so many other communities are suffering right now, we hope you will join us in making a contribution to the American Red Cross.

With any storm like this, we're all in it together.

The ad includes the American Red Cross logo and how to make a contribution. This shows some element of corporate social responsibility, which is in stark contrast to the lack of empathy exhibited during the Derecho, when Pepco even tried to charge customers a fee for the days they did not have power.

Gone is the defensiveness of the post-Derecho advertising. But this is Pepco after all, and there still is an element of back-patting:

But because of early preparations and your help in reporting outages and downed lines, we were able to respond quickly to this historic event.

Is this a new Pepco? I am cautiously optimistic.

Your thoughts?

It's not the medium, it's the message

Here I go again. Pepco can't seem to stop providing material. On Friday, I received a letter from Thomas H. Graham, Pepco's regional president. It was addressed to "Dear Valued Pepco Customer."

This letter, dated August 3 (but received two weeks later), is more of what we have already seen in Pepco's ads and public statements. The derecho was very bad. Pepco had a lot of work to do. Pepco is committed to improving reliability.

Same message, different medium.

My favorite line is this:

Yet, even with all the destruction, Pepco restored power to 90% of customers by midnight on July 4, more than 48 hours before our original estimate.

Let's rewrite: Most Pepco customers were without power for five days. Pepco did not get power to all its customers until some eight days after the storm.

Without the spin, it doesn't sound so good, does it?

Then we have this gem:

Today, we are stronger and more reliable—but no amount of strengthening to our system could have withstood a storm of this magnitude.

In other words, Pepco wants customers to be aware that Pepco is not equipped to deal with storms "of this magnitude."

And the letter finishes off with the same message that we have

seen over and over:

Again, we sincerely thank you for your patience. I would also like to thank customers who took time to show their gratitude—shaking crew members' hands, leaving them notes, water and Popsicles...We will continue to enhance our reliability...

Note to Mr. Graham: anybody who was able to give crew members Popsicles had to have some refrigeration. Just saying.

Pepco does not get that it does not matter what medium you use, the message is still not resonating.

Personally, I don't feel any better about Pepco after reading this letter—in fact, I am angry that the company would waste paper, postage and money putting together another self-congratulatory and inaccurate piece of propaganda. What do you think? Is direct mail to customers the way to get across this message?