

WaPo: Carney hopes and Pepco failures

Two items from today's Washington Post caught my eye. One was about Jay Carney, the new White House press secretary and the other was a letter to the editor regarding Pepco.

Speaking for the White House

Jay Carney is taking over from Robert Gibbs as White House press secretary. Carney was a journalist, and many people think he will bring a journalist's viewpoint to the White House briefing room. Dana Milbank wonders "Can Jay Carney Hack it as a Flack" in an op-ed in today's Washington Post. Few people will miss Gibbs, so maybe by comparison, Carney will already do better. I wrote about Gibbs snark here. If one thing Carney can learn from Gibbs is how not to act. I think the press corps are looking for information without sarcasm.

Proving advertising doesn't turn the lights back on

Another hot topic this week (other than the ongoing protests in Egypt) is Pepco. If you live in the DC area you know that Pepco failed, once again, to restore power in a timely fashion following a weird snow storm last week. At one point, they had 300,000 customers without power and in many cases, it took them three or four days to restore power to all of them. Witness how people felt about it, and more importantly, about how Pepco mishandled communications by reading letters to the editor in today's Post. Notice the title of the piece includes the word "outrage."

This latest episode in Pepco's ongoing reliability struggle proves my point that no matter how many nice ads and promising assertions you make, you have to back them up with real action. As you recall, Pepco started running an ad campaign talking about all the stuff they are doing to make themselves

more reliable and responsive. Well, sadly, it was just words. No one believed it then, and certainly, no one believes it now. Instead of spending lots of ad dollars on an image campaign, Pepco should spend some money figuring out how to increase its reliability, responsiveness and communications with customers.

The bottom line for both these stories is that communications matter a whole lot. How you handle communications, what you say, when you say it, can truly impact public opinion and your image.

Pepco Post Number 3

As I mentioned in my last post, the Washington Post published a pretty devastating expose of Pepco's failings and today, there are several letters to the editor that provide some insight into public unhappiness with the utility company. Additionally, Post columnist Robert McCartney has a pretty strong take on Pepco and its excuses.

Pepco is facing a public relations crisis. As McCartney points out, Pepco's PR strategy of saying that customer's expectations are too high is unsatisfactory and, frankly, ridiculous. The last time I checked, the United States is a first-world country, and Washington, D.C. is its capital. As such, it is not out of line to expect power to be 100% reliable. If, however, this was Haiti, then maybe expectations of electrical service would not be met.

Pepco's brand promise SHOULD be about reliability. Instead the brand has come to mean LACK OF RELIABILITY. In order to restore its brand, Pepco is going to have to engage in communications that are responsive to real concerns, but

further, should absolutely engage in **FIXING THE PROBLEM**. As I stated before, no amount of communications is going to satisfy a customer who has experienced frequent, extended power outages.



UPDATE: Pepco and reliability

Last Friday, I wrote about how Pepco needs to concentrate on customer service and less on marketing. In fact, the company will have to deal with lots of damage control because the Washington Post published a devastating article on Sunday that finds that Pepco has **TERRIBLE** reliability and that it has nothing to do with trees and storms but rather with equipment failure. In response, Pepco will have a press conference today to discuss their five-year improvement plan.

Again, Pepco would be best advised to spend money fixing the problem than spending thousands on an ad campaign to make the company appear to care about its customers. In the end, customers don't have a choice when it comes to power companies. I understand the latest Pepco ad campaign is about image...but again, customers will develop an image based on their own experiences. Everyone who suffers power outages frequently (Pepco customers suffer power outages 70% more frequently than counterparts in other large cities) knows Pepco is **NOT** reliable, and does not work hard enough to restore power quickly. Today's full-color ad in the Washington Post (with the tagline "We're working for you") is not going to change minds.

Do you think Pepco can fix its image? Is image even the

problem?