

CESA Clean Energy Messaging

May, 2004

In 2003, as part of the Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA), several state clean energy funds joined resources to develop a public education approach to clean energy. These states (Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania) faced similar market issues: despite consistently reported research findings that showed consumer preference for clean energy over fossil fuels, even at higher prices, market activity failed to materialize. Clean energy has remained a low interest, low purchase commodity that has yet to penetrate at meaningful levels.

There are several marketing challenges to developing a clean energy marketplace. Chief among these is the lack of consistent nomenclature. Some stakeholders call it clean energy; others call it green power; while others refer to it as renewable energy. Not surprisingly, consumers are confused as well. Additionally, consumers now feel political and economic pressures from the war in Iraq, the Enron scandal, and rising gas prices; yet it is unclear how these issues affect consumer attitudes about electricity.

CESA engaged the services of advertising consultants who bring consumer marketing experience to the clean energy problem. The consultant team recommended the development of a branding campaign that would create a common look and feel for clean energy and identify core messages about clean energy that could create emotional hooks with the consumer.

Over the past eight months, CESA has been working with its consultant team along with its advertising agency – Gardner-Nelson, a New York City firm – to develop that branding campaign. Gardner-Nelson was selected after an extensive search because of its research innovations and proven creative excellence.

Methods

The CESA branding effort began with an omnibus survey of 1000 Americans to identify what terminology consumers currently use to describe electricity from sources like solar, wind and water. “Natural energy” was the term most cited by respondents (32%), but because of the confusion with the term “natural gas,” CESA rejected that choice. A close second, at 28%, was the term “clean energy.” Because the term “clean” is a positive term, works with a broad audience and was far ahead of any other choices (the next closest term was “alternative energy” at 12%), CESA agreed to use “Clean Energy” in its branding efforts.

To uncover potential messages that would motivate consumers to consider clean energy more carefully, our advertising agency used a series of innovative research techniques that had been successful at revealing surprising findings with other clients. We conducted six focus groups, consisting of consumers, businesses and opinion leaders and led them through exercises that required participants to: 1) write an obituary for fossil fuels; 2) draw a picture of their clean energy world, name it and date it; 3) review concept ads that reflected a range of potential messaging themes; and 4) select those messages that most resonated.

Findings

The findings from these focus groups were enlightening.

We learned from the obituary exercise that consumers across the board, including those with environmentally-oriented perspective, appreciate the importance and need for fossil fuels in a world with a voracious energy appetite. All participants expressed concern about what could possibly replace the impressive job fossil fuels perform and, despite understanding their polluting effects, were uneasy about a future without them. Our focus group participants understood that clean energies such as solar and wind would possibly take their place, but these energies were described as “quirky” and possibly not up to the task.

From the exercise where consumers drew their clean energy world, we discovered that consumers saw clean energy worlds as either far in the future or in the distant past. Most drawings showed many small installations on a home or car, with back-up systems in place. These worlds were called “Gilligan’s Island” or “Solaria”. As one participant said, “It’s a nice place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there.”

We concluded from these two exercises that, while respondents knew about clean energy and understood its benefits over fossil fuels, they also appreciated how much energy is needed to make our world work. They did not see clean energy as up to scale, with sufficient strength to power our world.

The next step in our research process was to show concept boards that depicted a number of messaging options, ranging from environment and health to energy independence and self-sufficiency to jobs and technology. In total the groups were shown 28 ad concepts covering seven themes. In almost every case the ad that showed the full power and strength of clean energy prevailed. Respondents particularly highlighted a copy point: that 9% of America’s energy came from clean energy sources. This number surprised them and implied that clean energy was more of a reality than they had previously thought.

Conclusions

Our research study concluded that our creative approach must show clean energy sources at full strength, up to the task of powering our world and more of a reality than people realize. Our goal was to show visuals of clean energy sources at full scale and to use a tone of strength and leadership. The goal of the branding campaign is to provide the CESA clean energy states with a toolbox of materials that could be customized for local identification. Included in the toolbox are: three 15-second TV spots, two 50-second radio spots with a 10-second tag for localization; one outdoor ad, two print ads and a logo and tagline.

It is our hope that through this campaign’s efforts, all stakeholders will embrace the term “clean energy” and begin to use the campaign theme “It’s here. It’s real. It’s working. Clean Energy. Let’s Make More.”