

Communication is Key: The Yuck Factor

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Promoting an idea, whether it be through fundraising or educating, is the hardest part of getting any idea off the ground. However, some ideas are easier than others. When Girl Scouts come to the door, sporting their colored vests and sashes, the homeowner doesn't question what is being advertised, and most times they do not deny the cookies these girls are inevitably selling unless they have already procured their year's stash from someone else. Their idea of helping girls grow up learning leadership skills was widely accepted by the public and easily communicated through the cookie sales. However, not all ideas are as easily accepted as over-priced cookies in a wagon pulled by a cute little first-grader. Around the world, scientific minds have been pushing and pulling at the public's attention, trying to get them to understand and appreciate a new form of water renewal. Recycling waste water back into useable or potable water is nothing new in any form of the word. Nature has been doing this for millennia. Incorporating a system that can quickly and easily revert waste water back into drinkable water into a community has many benefits, especially in areas that are suffering from water insecurity. It can be expected, however, that people will feel a little apprehensive about waste water running back through their spigots and faucets. This is why educating the public about this idea is so critical to it getting approved. All problems involved in promoting recycled waste water can be boiled down to how it's communicated to the public, however, these problems can be easily avoided with good presentation and easy to understand facts.

In May of 2005, a group of women met for their annual Ladies' Club meeting in Toowoomba, Australia. Their speaker for that meeting was the mayor of their town, Dianne Thorley. Much to the distaste of the audience, Mayor Di explained that their city was now going to

use a new source of water, one in which waste water was recycled back into the drinking water through new technology. This was the mayor's solution to the ongoing drought taking place in their city. The ladies did not share Mayor Di's gusto for drinking sewer water. This started an ongoing war between the city officials and the citizens.¹ The way she spoke, and the way the audience interpreted her, lead to misunderstandings and ultimately a debate that would not only last over a year, but end with the recycling water program being scrapped. Mayor Di's approach to this topic of water recycling should've been as refined as the water she was trying to promote. First impressions are important, and the people's first impression of the Toowoomba water recycling idea were definitely sub-par. Her blunt statements and how she had already decided that this system was going to take place made her audience uneasy. There was no explanation of the technology involved until later in the year. She neglected to ease the citizens into a state of mind where recycled water was more logical. After her presentation, the ladies in the Ladies' Club were left disgusted, flabbergasted, and very strongly against the idea. Later in the year, there were more presentations, dealing with the technical and scientific processes involved in purifying the water, but the first impression remained predominant, despite the logic and reason behind the explanations of why this sort of system would be the most beneficial to Toowoomba. Mayor Di's problems were rooted in stubbornness and lack of understanding, and because the failure to properly communicate and convince the citizens of the advantages, Toowoomba is now paying seven million more dollars water to be piped in from somewhere else, rather than recycle the water already on site.²

Where Toowoomba ultimately rejected the idea of recycled water, Orange County, California was much more accepting to the idea. Orange County is typically associated with the

¹ "The Big Thirst" by Charles Fishman, pg 150

² "The Big Thirst" by Charles Fishman, pg 179

wealthy and well behaved, and one would almost never guess that their water was recycled from the sewer. What made this community so much more accepting of a water recycling system was due to the effort put into the public awareness. “Orange County designed an elaborate public education process while its plant was being built—and it uses precisely the technology Toowoomba proposed...”³ The same technology as Toowoomba, and yet it was widely accepted in Orange County and declined in Toowoomba. One of the main differences was the approach used in California. It was a gradual transition, with explanations given before the officials said it was a definite movement and information given before the citizens even knew they had questions. The other main difference was that in California, they decided to thread the water through a pipe and into an underground aquifer. They found that “people like their water to disappear into the ground for a while”. This last step is called “polishing” and it serves more for the minds of the people than for the water itself.⁴ It’s, in a way, synonymous to parents hiding broccoli in their child’s food to get them to eat their vegetables.

We can use Toowoomba’s rejection and Orange County’s acceptance as building blocks to see what is most effective in gaining the support of the people. Ultimately, the difference between their two approaches was the communication with the public. As stated earlier, Mayor Di swept the figurative rug out from under the Toowoombians’ feet, leaving them bewildered with this talk of an unknown technology that was supposed to turn their sewer water into something they can make homemade lemonade with. What Mayor Di failed to realize, and what scientists need to keep in mind when they propose ideas to the masses, was that the audience had no background knowledge about the water filtration system that would be in use. They do not know the statistics and the figures that show it as a reliable system. In some extreme cases, the public may not even be aware

³ The Big Thirst by Charles Fishman, pg 158

⁴ The Big Thirst by Charles Fishman, pg 158

that their situation is dire enough to require this sort of service. Mayor Di should have covered why this system was needed, how it would be done, shown detailed but easy to follow steps to the filtration process, and then continued to tell the citizens that this was a very possible solution to their problems. But even that is not enough. People do not always have the confidence in technology that a scientist might have. A conversation I had with one of my Professors, after I mistakenly answered a question with Toowoomba and I was then asked to then explain what Toowoomba was, ended with him saying something along the lines of 'I wouldn't trust that, because you know somewhere along the line some guy is going to mess up and the water won't be clean'. This is yet another example of how insufficient explanation leads to false assumptions and wrong ideas.

However, it is foolish to assume that everyone will simply fall in line and accept a new lifestyle with only a short power-point presentation with how the technology works and some pretty words. Clarifying what exactly is being done may help ease the masses' anxiety, but sometimes that just isn't enough to make people agree with moving forward. In my experience, if this is the case, those people will usually react to a demonstration. Something along the lines of watching the water go from some polluted mess, to something clear and pristine. To take it a step further, it'd be easy enough to have someone simply drink some of this recycled water; monkey see, monkey do. It would also be an interesting experiment to have a water park that was completely supplied through recycled water, because while people may be skittish about drinking the water, if they were to see it clean enough to swim in, it'd be a step forward.

Promoting any idea has its difficulties. Promoting an idea that involves turning waste water into clean water appears to be one of the more difficult ones to get across. Despite good intentions and solid evidence, a system like that can still be denied simply because the people were not ready for that kind of change. Toowoomba was in a situation of drought, water was so desperately

needed that they were praying to the heavens for rain. And yet, when a solution to the problem emerged, it was shot down due to insecurity and fear. It's hard to imagine, but ultimately an easy concept, that these problems could've easily been avoided if the officials had simply communicated better with the public. A friendly looking cartoon, showing a droplet of water going through the cleaning process, a brochure highlighting all of the wonders and advantages of recycled water, actions along those lines would've proved useful. And who knows, maybe sending around a group of small children selling cookies would have softened up the public to the idea as well.