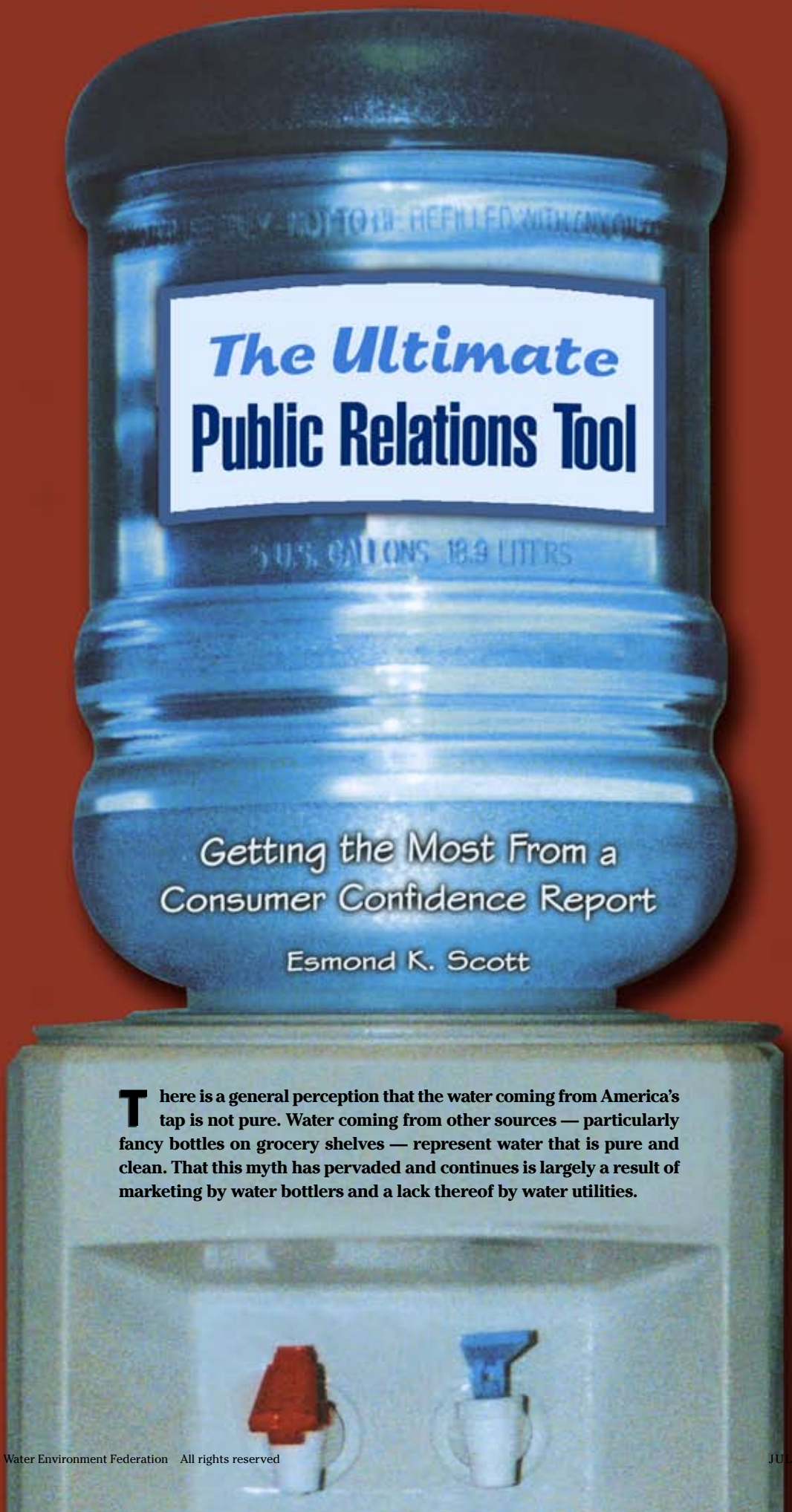

The Ultimate Public Relations Tool

Getting the Most From a Consumer Confidence Report

Esmond K. Scott

There is a general perception that the water coming from America's tap is not pure. Water coming from other sources — particularly fancy bottles on grocery shelves — represent water that is pure and clean. That this myth has pervaded and continues is largely a result of marketing by water bottlers and a lack thereof by water utilities.

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In addition to the mandated information, the City of North Miami Beach's 2002 consumer confidence report included a monthly planner, games, and a gallery of local children's winning poster contest entries.

For some utilities therefore, the right-to-know provisions in the 1996 amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act provided a golden opportunity in the form of the consumer confidence report (CCR). The Public Utilities Department of the City of North Miami Beach, Fla., chose to view the mandatory reports as an opportunity to ensure that its customers receive much needed information about their drinking water and the utility that produces it.

North Miami Beach operates the second largest water utility in Miami–Dade County. For years, the utility had operated within the old paradigm: Produce water and bill customers. In a strict economic sense, water is an essential good, and the demand is inelastic with respect to price. In other words, an increase in water prices would show very little decrease, if any, in the demand for water.

Water is a needed resource. In the old paradigm, therefore, there really was no need to educate and inform customers about this valuable resource. Public outreach was nonexistent, and this only served to contribute to poor public perception.

Consumer Focus

However, when the CCR requirements were implemented, North Miami Beach had recently formed a public education team dedicated to educating its customers through public outreach. The team, which consists of a water conservation coordinator, a utility neighborhood coordinator, and a public information officer, was making significant strides in meeting with and sending information to its base of approximately 180,000 customers, and the CCR proved to be the tool it needed. The utility saw an opportunity to use the report's required components as the core of a more involved public information mailing.

The mandated CCR, in its bare shell, is a maze of tables and numbers that is chock-full of information but does little to capture the interest of its intended audience. While utility customers generally are well informed, environmentally conscious, and seek to hold "big government" more accountable, most do not rush to the mailbox each year in anticipation of the annual CCR, although the more curious and better informed customers may do so.

The utility's public services director, Kelvin Baker, asked a simple question: "If a CCR was mandated to go to all customers, why not make it inviting?"

Spreading the Word

That question changed the utility's approach to producing its CCR. In the first year, it hired a

The city created its 2001 Water Quality Report to also serve as a July 2002–June 2003 calendar. Each month featured a different topic such as water conservation, education tours, water workshops, and community events.

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The 2004 Water Quality Report was produced with several tabs to quickly direct readers to the information they needed.

consultant to create its CCR. The consultant did a good job of including the required information. However, the result was a prototype quite like those of thousands of other utilities throughout the United States. It bore salient information and satisfied the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandate, but it was bland. As a result, Baker assembled a focus group to create a CCR that would have all the components EPA requires, as well as other components the utility's customers needed to know.

Water conservation topped the need-to-know category for customers. South Florida had just emerged from a severe drought. Water restrictions had been in full effect, and municipalities were assessing whether the ordinances in place addressed the needed restrictions.

Additionally, North Miami Beach used the CCR document to announce its neighborhood outreach program. This program would be responsible for informing customers about utility happenings, listening to and addressing customer concerns, and providing groups — such as homeowners associations and civic and religious organization — with an avenue to communicate with the utility. The groups would have a dedicated contact person in the utility and could even place the utility on their meeting agendas. The outreach program had to be introduced and advertised in the CCR.

The CCR also covered the utility's water plant expansion. When all utilities were faced with improving drinking water standards as outlined in mandates under the Safe Water Drinking Act, the utility had decided to change its method of producing water. It sought to build a new membrane treatment facility and needed to inform its customers.

Customers also needed to know about the utility's bottled water program. The utility began bottling its water in 1998 to ensure that its product was consumed. As water producers, the utility believed that customers should be informed about and encouraged to drink tap water. The utility partnered with a bottler and began producing water solely to distribute to its customers for community acitivities. Schools, as well as civic, religious, and other groups strapped for dollars, could request water from the utility.

The back of this 2005–2006 calendar includes public information about a planned upgrade to North Miami Beach's water treatment plant.

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Kids' Corner

An idea also was presented to include components relevant to children and their parents. Each year, school children in Florida are encouraged to design water conservation posters for competition. The best local winners are presented to the state, and a state winner is chosen. North Miami Beach's school children had gained much success in this competition, so the decision was made to include these posters in the annual CCR. Adding something from children's perspectives to the document demonstrated that the utility was being all-inclusive. Moreover, by adding the posters, the CCR became a keepsake for families and friends of the featured artists.

So, little by little, a list of vibrant topics was developed for the annual CCR. These items separately were important pieces of literature to be placed in their own individual brochures and mailed to customers. However, with an annual document mandated to be in consumers' hands, a catch-all document would serve the purpose well.

Consequently, in all the years that the North Miami Beach has mailed a CCR, it has always taken the opportunity to produce a report that details everything customers would want to know about their tap water, as well as what is happening within the utility.

This meticulous and deliberate approach to the production of a CCR has yielded good results. The reports have fostered conversation and provided the utility with much feedback.

This news is not only echoing in North Miami Beach. The utility's CCRs have been recognized by EPA for all the components that have become part and parcel of this document. Its 2002 report was declared best in the state and best among seven states' large groundwater utilities by EPA Region 4; the 2003 report garnered statewide honors as well.

Developing a successful CCR is based on the leadership of a creative director of public services, the brainstorming of its focus groups to find the right content, and a willingness to listen to the customer's needs. Overall, the City of North Miami Beach's CCR production is a study of how one utility capitalized on an annual mandate and surrounded it with solid public information to produce its ultimate public relations tool each year.

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