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What You See Is What You Get

7 Ways to use technology to promote a positive image to your customers

Image. Substance. Often people claim you cannot have both. It might seem a daunting task to have everything: a clean look and form coupled with usefulness and functionality. As a web programmer and designer, I see requests often from people wanting both. It is possible. In fact, it can now be easy to achieve both image and substance simultaneously if you use a bit of technology in this pursuit. The end result is that your customers see your positive, professional image portrayed in addition to experiencing it. What you see is what you get.

1. Email signature

One of the easiest ways to promote professionalism is in your email communication. Don't assume because you email someone that they can guess who you are based on a complicated abbreviated email address. They may not have you in their contacts list. Every email client worth their weight allows you to have a predefined signature that is appended on every email you send. Take a few seconds to create a signature that at least contains your full name, phone number, and link to your website. Optionally, you can add quotes or logos, or disclaimer information.

Using an email signature tells your customers you are unassuming, thorough, and communicative.

2. Subject line of your emails

Another fast and easy way to use emails to show off your professional image is to construct a good subject line for every email you send. I often receive emails from my Web site customers with one word subjects: "Web site." Because I deal with many people and many Web sites, this non-descript subject line gives me no indication of what to expect when I open it or who it is from. In addition, if I archive this email because it contains pertinent information to save, I am unable to use the subject line to help narrow down a search for the content later. So, what should your subject line be? It should be a succinct description of your main point. Try this: write your email first. Then proofread it and make sure it contains all the information you intended. Then go back and write a subject line that contains the main goal or goals of your email.

Writing a good subject line tells your customers you are thoughtful, long-term oriented, and organized.

3. Canned responses

Since we are on the subject of email, responding to emails can be a time consuming part of your day. And often, you might find yourself typing out the same answer to the same question you had yesterday. If you are lazy (a.k.a. efficient) you might copy and paste what you said earlier to this new request. And even lazier way is using canned responses. Some email clients have a feature that allows you to pre-populate an email with just a click or two. For example, if you use Gmail, go to Settings, Labs, then search for Canned Responses. Just enable that to add that Google labs feature. When you type something into an email, you can save it as a canned response, then in another email later, add that exact same content to a new recipient. Then you can edit or personalize the content before you send. This saves time but gives the image of personal attention. It

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also ensures that you do not leave out any important details you may have forgotten if you only go from your memory.

Using canned responses as a starting point for good email content tells your customers that you are timely, thorough, and individualized in your responses.

4. Logo

Should a city or water system have a logo? Absolutely yes! Customers recognize icons subconsciously, yet with repetitive viewing develop a particular feel about an organization based on that image. Often, efforts of those in the water industry go unnoticed and unappreciated. Having a presence by using a logo can give you an edge for customers to remember you are there. However, a poorly constructed logo can leave a bad impression. Your logo should be professionally created. Resist the urge to save money or time by using a hand drawn or homebuilt design. You can use the following Web sites to buy a professional logo quickly and for a fraction of the cost of custom graphic design. At **BrandCrowd.com** you can browse and purchase ready-made logos instantly. They allow you to request slight alterations and give you exclusivity. **LogoBids.com** and **DesignCrowd.com** are two Web sites that promote identity and branding through contests for graphic artists. You set up a free account and request the exact specifications you would like in a logo. You also specify how much you will pay for it. Any graphic designer can see your contest and submit an entry. You get the benefit of many choices but pay only for the one you choose, at the price you set.

Having a professional logo tells your customers you are consistently there and care about continuity.

5. Your Web site

Perhaps many cities or RWDs believe they are too small to have a Web site, or don't really need one because there is not a lot of information they need to post. Here is great news. Your Web site does not need to be terrific. It just needs to be clean and useful. Every city or RWD could benefit from a simple web presence with a few pages that contain answers to frequently asked questions, hours of operation, and general contact information. In addition, a picture is worth a thousand words, and having images that convey your mission to your customers goes a long ways towards their view of your efforts. You can also save costs and reduce paper waste by posting CCRs online and printing a link to it on your water bill. Online surveys and polls are another easy way to get feedback from your customers as well as inform. KRWA offers to its members an inexpensive way to get online through the Web Services program. This content management template Web site is easy to use and maintain, all with the backing of KRWA. View KRWA.net/demo to see more.

Having a web presence tells your customers you are progressive, current, economical, and communicate as well as listen.

> **Your Web site does not need to be terrific. It just needs to be clean and useful.**

6. Social media

Despite any hyped up news report, Facebook and Twitter are not going away. With smartphones taking over as the preferred way to get information, social media is a valid way to communicate and receive feedback from your customers. Thankfully, it is easy to do. You can tie a Twitter account to a Facebook account so that a post to one or the other automatically updates the other. A post can be made through a simple text from a mobile phone or with one entry into a website from any browser. You can also plug in your posts to your own website for automatic display.

Using social media tells your customers you are willing to reach them on their terms.
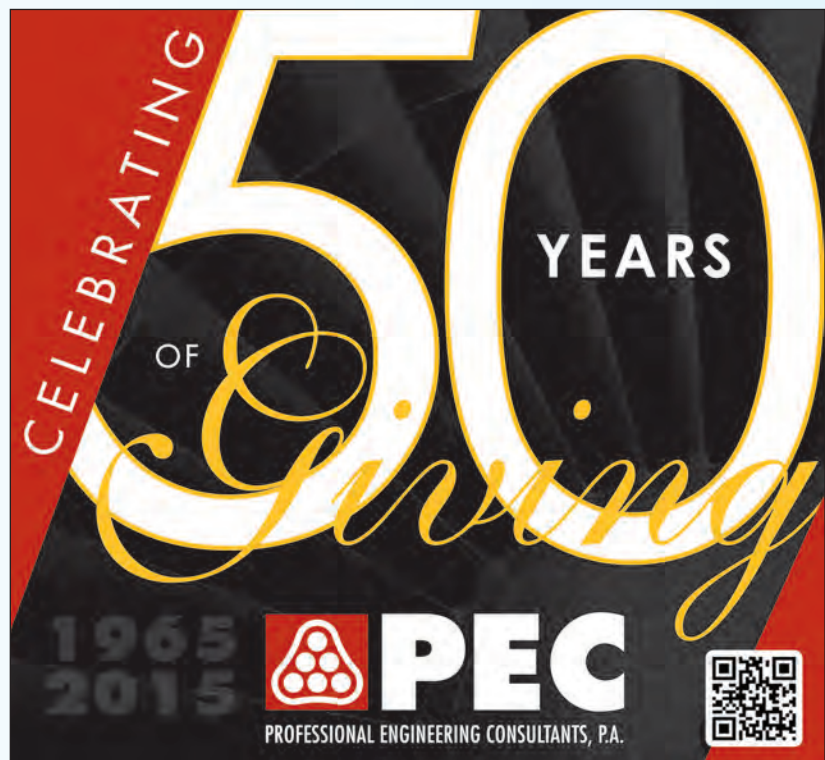
7. Pay bills online

This one is a biggie. Being able to pay a water bill online is no longer a request. It has become an expectation. Thankfully, giving your customers this feature is simple and can cost you nothing, and you don't even need a website. While there are many equally viable options, one easy way is through the State of Kansas' KanPay program, **Kansas.gov/KanPay**. If you want more than a basic interface, there are other custom options available for a cost that allow you to offer online bill pay that can tie directly into your billing system. Customers can log in and view their accounts and pay online, and your workload decreases with the customer doing much of the data entry for you.

Offering online bill pay tells your customers that you are progressive in action not just thought and value their time and convenience as much as they do.

These seven ways are only a few ideas on how technology can help you improve your image without increasing your workload. But an unexpected side effect may result if you make a few of

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these small changes: it is the real, underlying advantage to "what you see is what you get." What might that be? The customer sees your image, your professional responsiveness, and your focus on functionality. In return, they will respond to you likewise, in a professional manner likely with less complaints and more positive feedback. In other words, **what they see is what you get!**

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.