

Research Phase due March 23- Irma Peña

## **Research Phase of PR Campaign Plan: Tri County Water Company**

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### **Defining our publics:**

1. **Current Customers** – Residents of McLennan, Falls, and Bell County residents who rely on our water company for water and wastewater services, most have lived in our area for less than five years.
  - a. They are “highly educated and affluent”. However, we need to also work for them to be able to know what services are provided.
2. **Potential Customers** – Future residents moving into these counties who will need water services, the numbers of customers doubles every 10 years.
3. **Local Government** – Two board members are local officials, and given the ethical concerns in local politics that are mentioned, transparency is key to gaining trust.
4. **Media Outlets** – Local newspapers, TV, and online news platforms who have helped us to cover the plant construction over the last year, and who could help us address issues covering of costs, government accountability, and headquarters project.
5. **Community and Environmental Groups** – The community that will be benefited from the headquarters’ geothermal energy, energy efficient lighting, motion sensors and low-water landscape. Moreover, the benefits of having an outdoor park and trail where public can go to for fitness activities, walks and picnic lunches, and the education center for community and school groups to book to learn about sustainable topics.
6. **Business Leaders and Developers** – As the company operates like a business, local developers and business owners have a stake in water infrastructure projects.

### **Situation Analysis:**

**Problem:** For the past 45 years, Tri County Water Company has operated under the radar, but there hasn’t been much communication about its internal business structure plan. Now, with a big change in the calendar, the start of operating an advanced wastewater treatment plan, this communication is more important than ever. Our new plant will bring new technology, but it will also come with an increased cost and will require a 6 percent user rate increase each year for at least the next three years (if not more). Given that Tri County hasn’t raised rates in 12 years, this change is likely to frustrate customers, especially with other financial burdens regarding housing and taxes. There is also an issue of misinformation, many customers are misinformed of what the company offers, how it operates, who it is funded by, all because of that lack of communication. On top of that, Tri County will be adding new headquarters next to the new plant, which will cost \$21 million and that will most likely raise many questions. Without a strong communication strategy, customers may think of these changes negatively, making it hard to be a smooth transition. Overall, this is a communication issue, one that must be addressed before misinformation and frustration take hold.

**Opportunity:** The new plant and new headquarters present an opportunity to rebrand Tri County as an environmentally responsible and customer-driven business. Moreover, it also allows the beginning of

good communication, the company can help shift the perception the public already has, clarify misconceptions and misinformation and build support for the rate increase by emphasizing their focus on sustainability and long-term benefits.

### **SWOT Analysis:**

#### **Internal Factor – Strengths:**

- Well-managed business with an "AA" financial rating (expectations of very low default risk)
- The company has provided consistent, high-quality water and wastewater services for over 45 years
- Pay-for-performance appraisal system for their workers.
- The new wastewater treatment plan will be using better technology to treat water before returning it to the environment

#### **Internal Factor – Weaknesses:**

- Lack of communication, it has only been resorted to only when necessary, rather than being part of an engagement strategy
- Weak branding and public awareness, over half of our customers can't recall our company's name and incorrectly associate the services offered.
- The board of directors does not fully understand Public Relations beyond "a tool to promote good things or cover up the bad things"
- Potential public perception issues with the new headquarters, a \$21 million headquarters could be seen as an unnecessary expense when rates are increasing.

#### **External Factor – Opportunities:**

- A new and more visible brand identity and a strategic PR Campaign could boost customer awareness and interaction with our company
- The new plant headquarters will offer an opportunity to engage schools, families, and environmental groups.
- Highlighting the eco-friendly goals that are in plan for the next years.
- The new changes could lead to building better relationships with the community, and establish trust and credibility.

#### **External Factor – Threats:**

- Residents already facing rising property taxes and public service costs may react frustrated to an additional financial burden.
- With two board members being elected officials, and recent political ethical questions, customers may be skeptical of our company and its decisions.
- If not managed properly, there could be social media backlash of misinformation of the company or the plant spreading online.
- Potential raise in concerns from residents who would be living near the wastewater plant and headquarters.

**For our research, we could use;**

**Informational Research – Low or no budget**

- **Customer Feedback:**
  - Who: Current customers, especially those who have lived in the area for less than five years
  - What: We need to find out what they think of Tri County’s services and overall satisfaction with communication from the company
  - How: Monitor comments and interactions on social media. Analyze customer service call logs for common concerns and questions.
  
- **Online Surveys:**
  - Who: Tri County customers across McLennan, Falls, and Bell Counties
  - What: Awareness of Tri County’s services, perception of the new wastewater plant, and reaction to the rate increase. Also, opinions on how Tri County communicates changes
  - How: Conduct surveys through email and social media, to monitor awareness and attitudes toward the new plant, headquarters, and rate increase. We can use Google Forms to collect and analyze responses.

**Formal Research (Requires budget):**

- **Surveys:** Conduct an extensive survey using a professional research firm to monitor customer attitudes toward the rate increase and new facilities.
  - Who: A representative sample of customers, including homeowners and renters
  - What: Their willingness to accept the 6% rate increase, find out how much they trust in Tri County’s management and services and any concerns about the wastewater treatment plant and new headquarters.
  - How: Conduct an extensive survey using a professional research firm to monitor customer attitudes. Offer small incentives (discounts, giveaways) to encourage participation
  
- **Focus Groups:**
  - Who: Key stakeholders like customers, home buyers, real estate workers, renters, business owners, etc.
  - What: Customer concerns about water/sewer services and rising costs. How to best communicate Tri County’s funding structure and benefits of the new facilities.
  - How: Host several focus group sessions in different service areas. Record and analyze discussions to identify common concerns and areas of improvement.

Planning Phase due March 30- Evan Pomrenke  
Implementation Phase due April 6 -Emily DaFoe  
Evaluation Phase due April 13 - Collin Chen  
Final Plan and Presentation due April 27 - Layla?

Meeting time TBD

Team presentations to class April 28 and April 30 (ALL)