

Incredibly, through a sound public relations program, customers can be made interested in receiving their bills. In brief, the idea is to substitute public service information for promotional or other self-serving messages customarily enclosed with bills rendered to consumers.

That concept has been developed into a full-scale program by Joseph R. McCormick, formerly Vice President-PR and now President, of Hartford Electric Light Company (HELCO), Hartford, Conn., and Robert B. Parker Jr., advertising executive. Parker is now President of Fairways International, Inc., West Hartford, which he organized in 1972 and which, in conjunction with HELCO's PR Manager, Thomas Brennan, conducts the bill insert activity.

Impetus for the development was McCormick's search for a new approach to bill enclosures (all too often appropriately known as "stuffers"). HELCO's consisted, in Parker's words, of "a little bit of PR ('what we've been doing to serve you better,' for example)...a little bit of public service (a recipe, perhaps)...and a little bit of hard sell (on an electric dryer, maybe) -- a sort of hodgepodge of messages that tended to dilute each other by appearing in the same package." The solution evolved during a meeting between McCormick and Parker; it was to replace enclosures which had been accompanying the bimonthly bills with ones carrying only public service information.

(This does NOT rule out recognition of the need to inform customers about urgent aspects of HELCO's business -- explanation of rate increases or power failures; selection of nuclear plant sites; promotion of new or special services; advice as to how to use energy economically; and promotion of better understanding of industry problems. In such cases, other communication channels are used or, if a bill enclosure is sent, the business message, printed separately, accompanies the public service folder.)

Certain basic guidelines were adopted at the beginning and have been faithfully followed. They call for: (1) Selection of subjects of interest to persons in a majority of households served; (2) No messages prompted by self-interest, because they would inevitably raise suspicions about the sincerity of HELCO's public service efforts; (3) Careful attention to the accuracy of material; (4) Establishment of credibility by collaboration (where appropriate) of independent authorities; (5) No aid to fund-raising campaigns; (6) No assistance to any non-profit organization on a regular basis.

Another fundamental principle is that there be no compromise with quality in any respect -- visual, content, or durability of the piece.

Each enclosure is $3\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$ ", twice-folded so as to produce eight panels. It is printed in two colors (except that three colors have been used for a Christmas insert) on paper stock with sufficient substance to make it crumple resistant. (Last year, it was decided to use recycled paper and add a message to that effect.) The outside panel combines a picture or design (by a professional commercial artist) with strong type so as to create instant visual impact. Copy is illustrated with excellent sketches or diagrams. Text is designed to be long enough to be informative but short enough to hold reader attention. The cover carries such titles as: "Backyard Weather Forecasting"; "The License Plate Game -- and other ideas for parents motor-ing with children"; and "100 Year Calendar 1901 -- 2000." Those are general titles, but others deal with local subjects of special interest to a majority of HELCO's residential customers or members of their families.

(more)

All information is obtained from knowledgeable local or national organizations. For example, The Children's Museum of Hartford was consulted for two guides to Connecticut's seashore treasures, "Whatzits" and "More 'Whatzits'"; and the Hartford Hospital and the Red Cross, for "What You Should Know About Blood." Other inserts have dealt with such diverse subjects as how to improve one's golf game, how to avoid being struck by lightning, "10 Commandments For The Small Investor," accidental poisoning, and work for volunteers.

One of the most popular inserts, "Let's Try To Restore Connecticut's Bluebird Population," was written with the aid of the Hartford Audubon Society and an ornithologist. It describes the reasons for a sharp decline in the bluebird population and tells of ways to counter this, chiefly by providing nesting boxes, plans for the building of which are given. Its publication caused a run on such structures in stores throughout the state and sparked a money-raising project by the Hartford Association of Retarded Children, who built 600 of them. This so impressed the State Parks and Forests Superintendent that he instituted similar efforts in many other areas. Audubon Magazine called it "the best presentation of the subject."

Each folder carries on the rear panel the HELCO logo and, in small type, the message, "Prepared as a public service by Hartford Electric Company in collaboration with (name of assisting organization, where appropriate)."

Each public service insert has produced a flood of letters of appreciation . . . More than 50,000 additional copies have been requested by schools, youth groups, garden clubs, museums, libraries, publications, and companies . . . There have also been extensive quotations on radio and TV and editorials in newspapers. . . Inserts are often subjects of general conversation at social events. . . Surveys show that many customers are keeping the folders they receive.

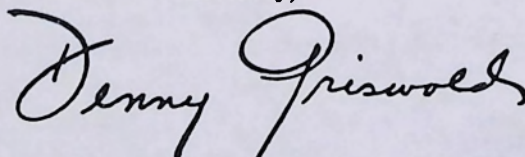
McCormick credits the program with making a substantial contribution to the utility's public reputation.

HELCO decided a few months ago to permit use of the enclosures by organizations outside Connecticut, partly as a public service to the U.S.A. business community and partly to help reduce the already moderate costs (less than 2½¢ per customer mailing). Adaptation of material to local needs of others is provided by Fairways International. Parker reports a lively interest on the part of nearly a score of utilities in nine other states and by organizations in certain unrelated fields.

* * * * *

For your PR NEWS IDEA LIBRARY, write to: E. Preston Calvert, Vice Pres., Pullman Inc., 200 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60604, for "International Supplement," accompanying the annual report, to serve the company's broadening markets overseas. . . Johnny Horizon '76, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C. 20240, for "Sponsor Kit," which tells how to conduct a clean-up campaign in readiness for the 200th birthday of the U.S.A.

Sincerely,



Editor