Ruling the Court of Public Opinion

More entities are finding that being seen as a responsible steward of water not only is the right thing to do; it's also critical for avoiding public scrutiny. Just ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which caught major heat recently for an accident that spilled a 3-million-gal yellow-orange plume of toxic waste into the Animas River and led New Mexico and Colorado to declare states of emergency. An EPA-supervised crew was attempting to clean up an old mining site when the spill occurred. Critics questioned the agency's response to the spill, accusing it of downplaying the accident's severity and taking too long to communicate it to public officials.

Businesses that sell consumer goods also face the public's critical eye when it comes to the environment, especially if they happen to be located in California. Therefore, some of them are diving into the water conversation headfirst. For instance, beer brand Shock Top (owned by Anheuser-Busch InBev) recently launched a cause marketing campaign called "Shock the Drought," according to the brand's website. Shock Top is partnering with crowdfunding platform Indiegogo to help fund water-saving inventions. The brand also has donated $100,000 to Drop-A-Brick, an invention that riffs on the old best practice of dropping a brick into a toilet tank for immediate water savings per flush. According to the project's website, the modern innovation saves about a half-gallon of water per flush.

Anheuser-Busch InBev is not the only brewer getting involved in the drought talk, according to an Ad Age article. MillerCoors reduced its water use at its Irwindale, Calif., brewery by 5.7% in 2014—on the heels of an 11.3% reduction in 2013. The results are a part of its campaign called "We Stand for Beer."

But not every beverage producer gets to share in the positive limelight. Nestlé, for example, recently was criticized for bottling from thirsty California's natural springs, according to an ABC News article. The nonprofit Courage Campaign took on the food and beverage giant with an online petition that quickly garnered more than 130,000 signatures. Nestlé pointed out that it uses less than 1% of the available water in the state, but agreed that a collaborative approach should be taken to manage water in the most efficient way possible. For those rubbed the wrong way by the negative press, however, it likely will take more than a few spokesperson quotes to convince them that the company truly cares about conserving water.

Public opinion is a tricky thing; therefore, the key is to proactively communicate where your organization stands on sustainability measures. Whether you are a manufacturing facility, service firm, utility or other business, you might want to consider how your organization can contribute to a water conversation. In addition to getting the tangible benefits from practicing what you preach—like reduced overhead and future water costs—implementing and communicating your good water practices is a reliable way to stay sustainable—and favorable.

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