STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Sell the Wind

By Cathy L. Hartman & Edwin R. Stafford

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2010

STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

Sell the Wind

How to get everyday people to care about alternative energy

By Cathy L. Hartman & Edwin R. Stafford

Many social changes hinge on good marketing. But what are social marketers to do when their target audience couldn't care less about—or even despises—the change they want to make?

That's the situation we encountered in 2003, when we joined the Utah Wind Working Group, a cross-sector volunteer forum organized to inform stakeholder groups about wind energy opportunities for the state of Utah. The Utah Energy Office sponsored our group, with funding from the U.S. Department of Energy's Wind Powering America program. This program supports working groups in states that face roadblocks in developing their wind resources, and it had targeted Utah as a priority.

Our job as marketing professors was to lead an outreach campaign that would promote wind power to the people of Utah, as well as to state legislators who were considering a bill that would provide tax incentives for renewable energy.

But most Utahns did not want wind power. At that time, the state relied almost entirely on inexpensive local coal for its electricity, and the state's conservative politicians were not inclined to alter the status quo. Citizens perceived wind power to be an expensive, ineffective experiment that had failed in the 1970s. And state legislators did not yet have climate change on their radar. Indeed, they had recently shot down a bill that required utilities to use renewable sources to generate a small percentage of their electricity. Markets, not mandates, they said, should set the path for Utah's energy future.

Heeding these words, we sharpened our wits to cultivate local market demand for wind power. After a few missteps, we learned that to sell wind power, we had to connect it to the values in the hearts of Utahns, rather than just to issues on their minds. We also learned that naysayers and allies sometimes arise from unexpected quarters.

The Heart of the Matter

For almost any audience, electricity is not a sexy subject. As long as lights come on and air conditioners hum, most people do not care about power. For Utahns, moreover, environmental protection often seems to conflict with industrial growth and outdoor recreation, including snowmobiling, hunting, and fishing. So we knew that getting Utahns excited about alternative energy would be no mean feat.

Our first brainstorming session resulted in a few catchy messages, such as "The Answer Is Blowing in the Wind" and "Homegrown Alternative Energy." Yet these slogans reinforced wind energy's image as fringe and experimental, and so we argued against them.

In a later round, we tried a different tactic: We started with our market, charting Utahns' values and concerns. Proud of their pioneer Mormon heritage, Utahns value self-reliance, hard work, strong families, small government, and national pride. To appeal to the state's enterprising can-do spirit, we named our outreach initiative "The Winds of Opportunity for Utah." Our wind working group colleagues liked the idea.

Next, we aimed our efforts at Utahns' softest spot: their children. At the time, Utah ranked dead last in state funding per student. Yet increasing taxes was an unpopular option for raising education funds. Wind farms, however, would increase property taxes, which project developers or owners typically pay over the course of the project. Because 75 percent of property taxes go to support local schools, wind power could improve education fund-

Cathy L. Hartman and **Edwin R. Stafford** are marketing professors and codirectors of the Center for the Market Diffusion of Renewable Energy and Clean Technology at the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University.

ILLUSTRATION BY YAREK WASZUL

ing. One of our slogans therefore connected wind energy with benefiting Utah children: "Wind Power Can Fund Schools!" We made this slogan ambiguous to prompt people to ask each other, "How *can* wind power fund schools?"

We then launched a Web site to answer that question, and we printed bumper stickers and notepads with the slogan and Web address. Members then distributed the swag at the capitol, state fair, and other venues. At the same time, working group members gave public talks, wrote op-eds and letters to the editor, and pitched stories to local reporters. Through these media, we explained how increased property tax revenues from wind farms would benefit schools. We further suggested that wind farms could be built on Utah's school trust lands to generate lease payments, which in turn would go directly into school coffers. We even proposed that wind turbines could be installed on school campuses to offset energy expenses and to free resources for educational programs—a scheme already working at a school in Spirit Lake, Iowa.

The biggest lesson from our nine-month-long alternative-energy campaign is that we had to win the hearts, not the minds, of our audiences.

Our group also procured access to billboards along Utah's main north-south highway corridor. For these, we designed an ad that appealed not only to Utahns' family values, but also to their patriotism: Children ran through a wind farm with "Wind Power Can Fund Schools!" emblazoned in red, white, and blue.

When the billboards debuted in November 2003, the message was an immediate hit. Thousands of visitors dropped by our Web site. More important, policymakers began promoting wind power as a way to benefit schools. By March 2004, with an almost unanimous vote, the legislature passed its first significant tax incentive for renewable energy.

SLIPPERY ISSUES

Not all of our messages were as effective as the schools campaign, however. An earlier attempt to link wind power to water conservation, for example, met considerably less success.

In the summer of 2003, Utah succumbed to a severe drought. A public service campaign encouraged Utahns to cut their water use. At the same time, a report from the Colorado-based Land and Water Fund of the Rockies (now Western Resource Advocates) estimated that the steam turbines and boilers of coal- and gas-fired power plants in the West consume more than 650 million gallons of water every day—the same amount of water needed to serve 4 million municipal residents in a year. This unsustainable trend threatens Western rivers, aquifers, and agriculture.

In contrast, harvesting breezes for electricity doesn't require any water. Capitalizing on this hot topic, we crafted another slogan: "Wind Power Saves Water!"

As with the school funding campaign, we floated our water conservation campaign before various media outlets. But no one paid attention to this new message.

Finally, we got a story in the *Provo Daily Herald* with the headline "Payson Plant Sparks Debate over Wind Power." But the story incorrectly reported that the Utah Energy Office was "speaking out about the benefits of wind power *following* protests over who owns the water needed to run a new Payson power plant." Our "saves water" message was initiated *before* the Payson water-energy conflict. Although the conflict illustrated a critical point of our "saves water" message, the article made our group and wind energy sound confrontational. "We didn't appreciate the slam," scolded a utility plant executive in a conference call.

The episode opened our eyes to how many Utahns viewed our "saves water" slogan. Although seemingly positive, the message cast utilities as villains and inflamed local water wars. Making enemies of utility executives wasn't our intent, nor did it help our cause.

Although the water campaign got a rise from one utility, no one else seemed to be paying attention. Traffic on our Web site was anemic, and our message wasn't connecting with our audience. In retrospect, we realized that linking wind power with water conservation—one environmental issue with another—did not resonate with Utahns' core values. Once the rainy season arrived, the drought issue evaporated from the airwaves—and with it our slogan's relevance. Fortunately, we were ready with our "Wind Power Can Fund Schools!" message.

POWERFUL ADVOCACY

The biggest lesson from our nine-month campaign is that we had to win hearts, not minds. Our "saves water" tagline was a technical fact that didn't resonate with most Utahns. In contrast, our "fund schools" initiative touched what Utahns hold near and dear to their hearts—children. It also cleared a path for wind power without raising taxes—a feature that appealed to Utahns' and state legislators' self-reliant streak. Because of these appeals to the heart, Utahns came to see wind power as a smart market solution.

We also learned how vital it is to consider unintended audiences. Myopically, we overlooked how our messages would impact groups beyond legislators and citizens. A utility executive's admonishment of our water message was a wake-up call to consider how messages may play among all potential stakeholders.

Unintended audiences may also become new allies. Although not an initial target, many school administrators leaped on board the wind movement in response to our school campaign. When Utah finally established its first wind project in the city of Spanish Fork in June 2008, local school officials proved pivotal in making the project happen.

Since this project's opening, the city of Spanish Fork has used some of its wind farm's tax revenues for an annual Wind Fest & Energy Expo, which features professional kite entertainers, crafts, and renewable energy exhibits. Utah's recently opened second wind farm, located near Milford, is also poised to become an economic boon for schools and the community. Our campaign techniques also caught national attention: Wind Powering America has adopted our schools campaign billboard image, which will soon help other states sell the wind to their residents. ■