

REPRESENTATIVE POLICY BOARD
CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
JULY 22, 2024
SPECIAL MEETING TRANSCRIPTION

Mark:

It is 5:30, I'm calling the meeting to order. Safety Moment is first. The Safety Moment is about poison ivy. Bob just had something to say. Three leaves, what is it, Bob? If it has three leaves, leave it or something?

Bob:

Let it be.

Mark:

Let it be. Let it be. Three leaves, then let it be. Okay. So stay away from poison ivy, unless you're not allergic to it. Next thing on the agenda is the public comment. Anybody here from the public?

Jennifer:

No, there's nobody from the public present.

Mark:

Thank you, Jennifer. We're going to have a Customer Satisfaction Index and Brand Image survey results by Prem and Dana.

Prem:

Thank you, Mark. And good evening, everyone, once again. So just wanted to refresh some of our memories. As you remember, we actually did a Customer Satisfaction Index survey and a Brand Image survey back in 2019. This is before pandemic, right? So fast forward now, we went back on to do a CSI survey. We use GreatBlue. Basically, if you remember, they actually do the same CSI survey and also brand image survey for other utilities in Connecticut. Connecticut Water is one of them. They do it for Eversource. They do it for the gas companies in here. So I just wanted to brief a little bit of where we stand in the overall survey. So again, as you all know, we actually have an annual report that we send out to everybody, all our customers. So right after we do that, between May 6th to May 22nd, we actually embarked on getting the survey out there for our customers and just some of the facts.

We did the survey for 600 customers through a telephonic survey that we do. This time, something a little different we did, we also tried to introduce the digital survey for 340 customers we preselected. As a matter of fact, we could introduce this to everybody in the future. This was more of a prototype, if you will. Want to really test the waters. I know, Mark, you had a question on how lengthy the survey was, right? The good news is that the digital survey is usually the lengthier one, right? Because it's got a lot more information, self-service, versus the survey that we typically do for our customers through telephonic. There's a whole process around it that we actually make sure that we look at all our towns, we look at all the demographics, in terms of the age groups of our customers. We look at different services we provide to the customers.

So we really come up with a, it's almost like rocket science, if you will, that GreatBlue helps us with, and we kind of scale this to 600 customers, right? That's the telephonic one. So now, a little bit of what we did. If you remember, pre-pandemic survey results were 91.8% customer satisfaction. That is never heard of, if you remember back in time, this is, I'm talking, five years ago. There had been a little bit of a trend that broadened, because of COVID. So when we did the survey, we landed at 88.1% as our CSI survey results. One would think, "Oh, we fell short." Remember, we also have a plus or minus 4% is our technical range for a survey that we do. We still were within our goals of our 91.8%, but one of the things we realized is that this was a broader industry impact across the board.

Many of our peers, they actually had almost 10 percentage points drop in their survey. We are fortunate. I think our results had been pretty optimistic. Some of the things we learned from this also is, why did we drop those 3.7 percentage points? Some of them were related to organizational characteristics that you see here, that was driven based off the perception of our people. We think most of them are based off of how the customer had changed in terms of expectations, and now, many of them have gone more remote, while the water usage is still there. We feel like much of the reception came from how they perceive RWA and what they see out there, in terms of online versus how many people are actually interacting as customers calling into a call center. So there's a perception that we think that was part of this, based on their usage.

As you all know, many people were home than actually out there during the pandemic time, so there probably was one of those things. We also actually looked at comparing ourselves to, how are we performing? How does 88.1% perform towards broader water release out there? On an average, that number, the benchmarking came back at a 77%. So we definitely are way higher than we called it almost top five percentile. We are in the top five percentile of other companies, which is pretty great. So we are retaining that. So we did some of that work, and then, we also did a Brand Image survey. The brand image survey was another interesting piece. So basically, there are a set of questions that we ask, in terms of how are we doing as RWA being a brand. As more recently, we have been doing some acquisitions and also a lot of stuff we do on water quality tests that is out there.

So based on the Brand Image Survey, the results came back at a 74.1%. How does this compare to our prior one, which was, I believe it was 70.9% was 2019? So we actually did well. And both between digital, as well as telephonic, the percentages were almost the same. So brand image is one of those things that we look at, and when you try to compare, how do other people out there perform, those actually vary based on different brands and based on what is going on in the industry. But perception wise and the benchmark that came back for other entities, they say it varies from somewhere between 60% to 66%. So it's almost that we did well within our own sales comparing to 2019, so that was also good news. Those are some very much of the highlights, if you will. And as I mentioned, we are in the top five percentile.

Some of the good things that we saw as part of the gains that we call, in terms of our percentage points, the three things I have listed here, the water quality preservation, the Hazwaste, and protection of our open spaces. We had higher percentage points increase, which also tells a story that we've been doing a good job from an environment perspective and really doing the right things, which is very positive. Water quality aspects, while we see that there is a deferral of six percentage points, we are talking about in the top 90 percentile anyway. So from that perspective, I think we fared really, really well. So the overall story has been very good. One of the requests that I have for our consumer affairs is to consider the digital survey, just to talk about that. As I mentioned earlier, we did 340 of those, and we landed at 78.3%.

From a cost perspective, it is much cheaper to do a digital survey compared to a telephonic survey. It's almost a fraction of the cost, and we have a lot more people, our [inaudible 00:09:06] person is so higher, so we may get a lot more perspectives if you do a digital survey. As a matter of fact, Connecticut Water just does digital only. They moved away from telephonic surveys from last year. And I'm hearing the same thing with Aquarion too. So it almost feels like everybody's moving towards that. Maybe cost is one perspective, and also, in terms of benchmarking ourselves. So 78.3% is online is what we scored. One may think why there is a huge swing between telephone versus an online. Online survey actually has some, what we call, self-selection biases that they have and social desirability factor or bias, we call it. There are certain things, but when you look at benchmarking ourselves to other people out there, we are definitely in the top five percentile.

So we are considering that, maybe next time we do this, we do more, and it also has rich feedback that comes back to us. So I think, overall, it's a good story and it also anchors us back on for the past five years how the trends has been changing, how RWD has been performing overall from a customer perspective. And again, like I said, we are much better, in terms of comparing to other utilities within our state. We've been doing really well. So that's my high level report. I said a lot there, a lot of percentages, a lot of things, and there are recommendations that we are taking into account.

So every time we do something, we want to make sure we are improving, based off of that. There have been some recommendations, and we'll be working through that, as part of that. Nothing alarming at this time. It's more things that we could do better. Kind of that scenario. So we'll take that recommendation, we'll implement from now until next survey that we will launch, hopefully next year, the plan. So that is the full picture here. So any questions for me from the team?

Mark:

It sounds pretty good. It sounds like we're doing better with environmental stewardship than we are with getting there on time.

Prem:

Yeah, there's always a perception, Mark, so we are trying to get better. But overall, I think it was a great story. It just came back on saying we've been doing much better, especially with the pandemic, right?

They said that we fared over 50% better than other the utilities noted, right? So the interaction was the customer said that our interaction was much better, at least 15 percentage points more than what others have been doing, which is good. Again, good to hear that we are listening to the customers more.

Mark:

I wonder what water utility reports would be like.

Prem:

They don't really share direct details, because it impacts the customer brand image from a company perspective. But they give us a benchmark of what we are. And I think one of the things they said was, while we were at 88.1%, in terms of our customer CSI, the average they said is around 77, which is almost 11 percentage points lesser, which I think probably reflects on other water companies. But they don't give us a percentage straight off saying, "This company is so much." They never do that, but we are better.

Mark:

Well, good.

Tony:

That gives us room to improve, right?

Prem:

Yes.

Mark:

Any other questions?

Stephen:

Mark, this is Steve. I apologize, I don't have video today. I had trouble connecting here, but can you hear me okay?

Prem:

Yeah, we can hear you, Steve, yeah.

Stephen:

I think the drivers of the decline that you saw are kind of not insignificant categories here. We usually see this whole report. Can we get that at some point?

Prem:

Absolutely. Yes, we do have a whole report as well, Steve. We can share the details.

Stephen:

Okay. And the work environment, RWA being a good place to work, how does customer address that?

Prem:

So it's an interesting fact, right? We looked at what was also happening at the time, and as you could imagine, we are talking May 6th to May 22nd, that was a time that we were also going through a union situation and all that. So there were some optics we think may have mixed customers as they're driving through, et cetera. But in terms of environmental stewardship, it was pretty good. When it comes down to in terms of organizational characteristics, it's very interesting, because some of those organizational characteristics scored very high points, in terms of the customer service, if you see this report, customer service, field service, they did exceptionally well, better than last year.

It's more of how the customer perceives and based on what their interaction had been, some of the customers probably never dealt with us, and maybe it happened so that they saw some stuff that was going on during that timeframe may have skewed a little bit. But that being said, the percentage points decline that we saw, in an overall basis, it is still higher compared to others. But when we say that

there's six percentage points lower, it's six percentage points of 91.8%. That was our prior score. So it is still not bad, and that's why the overall score is still at 88%, right? You see what I'm saying?

Stephen:

It's all relative.

Dana:

We're also better than the other water utilities.

Mark:

That's a good one.

Prem:

Yes. We only compared to our water partners, water utilities around us.

Stephen:

Well, this has been good for a long time, for many years, this has not changed. So I don't know. I don't know if it's COVID or not, or what's going on, but that's why I think...

Prem:

I would say we did look at the list of questions. We scrubbed a lot of them, because we did hear from customers in the past where they said too many questions to answer. So we came down to 63 from, I don't know, a hundred some questions. So I think which is good, which is good, so the customer felt good about answering these questions.

Stephen:

That's a lot of questions to get somebody to answer, but I think, when you're talking to someone, it's different than an online thing that they can do anonymously. I don't know. I guess people are switching to it.

Prem:

I think, remember even the online thing, we make sure that we look at our demographics and we only look at our customers, who are either they're getting water from us or PipeSafe or some services from us. So we look at all the services we offer too. And this time, it was just kind of a test approach, and we only had a small subscale of 340. But next time, when we do that, and if we open it up for everybody, there's going to be a lot more rich data. It's almost like you're trying to get insights on the customers who probably are not so happy and what can we do to improve that percentage points.

So it'll be much more rich data, but it's all good news, right, I think, so far. There's definitely recommendation. There's always room for improvement. We reflect on that, but it's definitely not a bad scenario. I do know personally some companies went down 14, 15 percentage points. And actually, for them, it was pretty bad, because they're also tying some of these things to their bonus and other things. So it has impacts on the company.

Stephen:

All right, thank you.

Prem:

Thank you.

Mark:

Thank you very much, Prem.

Prem:

Thank you.

Mark:

What the next thing on our agenda is approval of our minutes. Do I have a motion to approve our minutes?

Stephen:

So moved.

Mark:

Second?

Tony:

Second.

Mark:

All those in favor?

Committee members:

Aye.

Mark:

Any opposed? Passes. The minutes pass. Now, we can get our report from our OCA, who's been very busy.

Jeff:

Good evening. On the consumer complaint front, as I reported to you at the conclusion of June's RPB meeting on the Winters Run matter, the New Haven Association that's in bankruptcy, that has a significant dispute with Water Authority, they had offered to settle their \$138,000 balance for \$120,000. And the Authority advised the bankruptcy lawyer for the Association that that offer was acceptable. So now the bankruptcy court has to approve it, because it's a bankruptcy case, it gets paid under the

bankruptcy plan. So I think Dana's on, I don't know if there's any update on whether there's a hearing scheduled with the bankruptcy court.

Dana:

Yes. Thank you for that. Actually, the court did approve and accept the plan as submitted for the 120,000 for RWA, and we're expecting that court order, all those final papers and things should be coming through, I would think, this week or maybe early next.

Jeff:

Thank you. I think it's a very fair resolution, both for the customer and for the Authority. The Authority won't be getting interest while those payments are being made, but the Authority is, in essence, an unsecured non-priority creditor. So all things considered, I think it's a reasonable outcome for both the consumer and, like I said, for the Authority to recoup the principal.

Mark:

Did they put a lien on the people's houses?

Jeff:

No.

Mark:

No? Good.

Jeff:

No.

Mark:

Okay.

Dana:

The lien on the Association is still in place though, as part of the bankruptcy.

Jeff:

Right, not the individuals.

Dana:

But not on the individuals, correct.

Jeff:

In terms of other matters, obviously, we expect to receive a couple of significant applications from the Authority over the next couple of weeks, depending upon whether the five member authority approves

them. And that would include both the issuance test rate application, as well as an acquisition application. That's pretty much it.

Mark:

Thank you very much.

Jeff:

Thank you.

Mark:

I'm glad that this was settled. I felt bad for those people, and I hope they, after this, they can do something with the management company who screwed them.

Jeff:

Yes, that's really where the blame lies is with the management company for not being proactive and dealing with the problem responsibly.

Mark:

Do you know if they're going after them? Or is that their plan?

Jeff:

Well, there was an indication that the claim is an asset of the bankruptcy estate. Once you file bankruptcy, any assets or liabilities that you have, as of the date that you filed the bankruptcy petition, become assets and liabilities of the bankruptcy estate. So it'll be up to the bankruptcy trustee and the bankruptcy estate and the bankruptcy court to decide whether that's a claim that has value and is worth engaging special counsel to pursue.

Mark:

Okay. Well, it sounds much better than it did a month or two ago. Thank you.

Jeff:

Yes, sir.

Mark:

Okay. Approval of the OCA's June bill for \$3,138?

Stephen:

So moved.

Tony:

Second.

Representative Policy Board
Consumer Affairs Committee
July 22, 2024

Mark:

All those in favor?

Committee members:

Aye.

Mark:

Any opposed? You're getting paid again Jeff.

Jeff:

Good. I think it's about to get very busy.

Mark:

Volunteers to attend Authority meetings. Naomi, you're up for July 25th this week?

Naomi:

Yes.

Mark:

I'm on for the 22nd. And you're on again for the 26th of September. Thank you. Okay. Next item of business is to elect the chairman. As you know that I was elected chairman of the Land Use Committee, and I don't think it'd be right to be chairman of two committees. It takes away from a seat on the Executive board. So do we have anybody who wants to come forward? Or I have somebody I could nominate if you'd like.

Mark:

Hearing none, I'd like to nominate Naomi to be chair of the Consumer Affairs Committees. Anybody give a second on that?

Stephen:

I would second that.

Mark:

Okay. Are there any other nominations? Are there any other nominations? Are there any other nominations? Nominations are closed. All those in favor of Naomi being elected as chair of the Consumer Affairs Committee, please to signify by saying aye.

Committee members:

Aye.

Mark:

Representative Policy Board
Consumer Affairs Committee
July 22, 2024

Anybody opposed? Clearly, a majority, a unanimous decision. Naomi, you're the new chairman. Thank you.

Stephen:
Congratulations.

Prem:
Congratulations, Naomi. Looking forward to working with you.

Naomi:
Thank you.

Mark:
Any new business to come to the committee? Hearing none, our next meeting is August 19th, 2024 at 5:30. And there's only one thing, Naomi, I will give the report for this meeting.

Naomi:
Okay.

Mark:
Okay? So you're on after this.

Naomi:
Okay.

Mark:
I told Jennifer, I told you you'd walk her through it. Okay. All those in favor of adjourning, I need a motion to adjourn.

Stephen:
So moved.

Tony:
Second.

Mark:
All those in favor of adjourning?

Committee Members:
Aye.