

# SPI 2016: When Will We Have a “Got Milk” for Solar?

FEATURED INDUSTRY Sep 22, 2016



*Updated 9/23/16*

A key message at Solar Power International this year: it's time for solar to grow up. Key to that will be building a solar brand, which more than one analyst has pointed out is sorely lacking.

## What is brand?

What does that mean? This question was explored in a lively session at SPI, “Building the Solar Brand with Power: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Promote It,” moderated by Tor Valenza, Chief Marketing Officer of Solar at Impress Labs.

Valenza emphasized that brand is much more than your logo, your tagline, or even your product. Those are just reflections of your brand. What's important is the feeling your brand conveys – what you feel, for example, when you hear “Just Do It” or see the Nike swoosh.

This represents a change from the past, said Alison Mickey, Senior Director of Corporate Communications at Spruce Finance, when a brand was a personalized name for a product that told people where it came from. Today, it's what a prospect thinks of when she hears your name – including all the feelings, emotions, and perceptions that go along with that.

## Why do we need a solar brand?

When people hear solar, what do they think? Maybe “sustainable,” “the future,” or “good for the environment,” noted Valenza. But having a good perception of solar is different from wanting it on your roof. There's the perception that “solar is great, but it's not for me.”

What better evidence that we need a strong brand? For solar, this is not just about branding your own company, but more important, about perceptions of the industry as a whole. We should care about the industry's brand, said Mickey, as having a good solar brand can materially help the business of any solar company.

That's because currently, the solar sales process is twofold: first, you have to sell people on solar, then on your individual brand or service. A strong solar brand would eliminate that first step.

In its absence, Mickey noted, we've spent time and effort trying to overcome negative perceptions like those about Solyndra – which was a niche product not representative of the industry. This serves as a prime example of how negative experiences resonate more with people than positive ones.

## How do we build a strong solar brand?

A brand, said Mickey, requires a relationship – an alignment of how you want to be perceived with how people perceive you. It's much like a reputation: you have to work to maintain it. You have to establish trust by showing consistency – doing what you say you'll do – in your messaging, product quality, and delivery of services.

Consistency, she noted, is particularly important for newer industries like solar, which lack proven track records. That means that we're building trust one experience at a time.

In terms of company brands, she advised to involve everyone on the team, and repeat your brand values often internally. Be sure everyone knows what your brand is, and remind them they're a brand ambassador. Valenza added that it's helpful to keep mission statements simple and short, and ensure everyone at your company knows why you're in business.

While an overall brand is needed in solar, Valenza also believes that segmentation will never end. Effective messaging must still be specific and targeted, he said. Mickey suggested making individual pitches. For example, when marketing solar in the Southwest, it can be effective to point out that it uses less water than other power generation.

## Challenges

Why are we talking about this? Why hasn't the solar industry done better at branding?

Dan Whitten, Vice President of Communications at the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA), pointed to the financial advantage of the fossil fuel industry – which he's familiar with, having come from the natural gas business. Solar has a small fraction of the money that they have to work with.

Another challenge facing solar, said Valenza, is that the industry encompasses many different types of sectors. And, he added, we haven't done a good job of making our customers care. Our current messaging is lacking in urgency.

A few nuggets emerged that might shed some light on solutions:

- Most Americans have never bought power, noted Mickey; it's not like consumer electronics. We're asking people to think about something they've never thought about.
- People don't say no to solar, asserted an audience member: they say no to paying more than they used to pay.
- Everybody wants solar, said another, but most people don't understand it.
- Customers don't want a more complicated life – they want a service.

## Opportunities

Lest you conclude that solar is doomed with so many obstacles, remember that we have a lot in our favor.

Solar is different from fossil fuels, said Whitten, because you can buy it – you can own it. That makes our connection with consumers better.

Plus, people love solar. A SEIA poll showed that 87% of Americans have very favorable perceptions of solar. No other fuel can say this, he noted. We don't have the problem of the natural gas industry, "how to make people hate us less." And despite Solyndra, he said, solar has a very favorable perception in the media. We just need to take better advantage of the media attention.

Whitten also asserted that while some Republicans have thrown up obstacles to addressing climate change, the overwhelming consensus among all Americans, including many Republicans, is that climate change is real. So those obstacles should not keep us from advocating for solar.

## Moving toward a solar brand

That doesn't mean it will be simple. As Valenza pointed out, we have to make people care about what type of electricity service they get. One way to do this could be to capitalize on some people's desire to break free from their utility.

What brand campaign can unite us, he asked, and make most people perceive solar with the same positive brand feeling? He suggested that we start with #SolarIsNow and #WeAreSolar – which includes all sectors plus customers.

Paula Mints, Chief Market Research Analyst at SPV Market Research, agreed. We must consider customers one of us, she said or we lose them. We need to be all-inclusive and speak to our customers in a way that we're not doing now.

An important insight came from Mints, who noted that at some point the solar industry gave up on the idea of value. Our brand, she argued, should not be just about being cheap. It's not about the cheapest electricity in the world, she said – it's also about benefits like energy independence.

We should all think more about the value of solar – value in terms of much more than a dollar amount. While we do need to target messages to different groups, maybe our overall branding has been too scattered. Dollar savings, jobs, public health, national security: all of these and more can be summed up in the idea of value. We need to convey this value in a way that's easy for people to get. Let's see what we can do with that.

**Rosana Francescato**