

CASE STUDY: “Taking Steps to a Brighter Future”



outreach campaign for the Georgian Republic’s largest utility, United Energy Distribution Company (UEDC)

a marketing communications program fostering understanding, patience and support among the populace in a strategically important former Soviet Republic

Screen capture from campaign television commercial dramatizing the vital importance of electricity to every Georgian citizen

A most unusual email.....

In July, 2005 Muir Marketing Communications received an inquiry from overseas following an article published in the U.S. Commerce Dept's BISNIS newsletter. It



related our initial business experiences in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia.

The email came from PA Consulting, an internationally respected firm that had been hired two years earlier by



USAid and KfW to "westernize" the business practices of Georgia's largest utility, the United Energy Distribution Company (UEDC).

"Can you explain to the people that we actually have a plan?"

In fact, PA Consulting's mission was about more than squeezing a few more years from a broken down, Soviet era electrical system. Their goal was to completely reform UEDC to western business standards in order to attract the millions of dollars in private investment necessary to replace Georgia's electrical infrastructure!

But few people in Georgia understood this plan. Not customers and often, not their political leaders.

Reliable electricity is critical to the economic success of any developing economy. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that Georgian confidence in the pro-Western government of Mikhail Saakashvili will be partly linked, in the minds of Georgians, to the future of their electrical service.



Historic 2005 visit of President Bush to Georgia and its President, Mikhail Saakashvili

So what do we say to little old ladies in the Georgian countryside who are sitting home in the dark?

Our first reaction to PA's request was that expectations should be kept low! From our vantage point in America we feared that:

- 1) People who have no electricity are angry and don't want to hear anything except how soon power will be restored.
- 2) UEDC's long term strategy of "Westernizing" to attract investment could not be easily communicated.
- 3) If we did manage to find an effective way of communicating this message it would not be understood as a business concept, especially by people living in the "Regions" (towns and villages outside the Capital).



We decide to venture out and ask questions.....

Very soon after PA's original email, we found ourselves traveling (27 hours by train, plane and taxi) to the ancient capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. From there we headed out on barely passable roads to the "Regions". To the towns of Kutaisi and Gori (hometown of Stalin), to conduct focus group research.

Following an introduction in Russian by Jim Muir, questions were asked in English, translated, then answered in Georgian. Our partner in Georgia, Nino Chanishvili, then translated the responses back into English - everything on videotape/DVD. And what did we learn? Plenty!

For example:



- 1) Georgian people are conditioned to not having reliable electricity and UEDC had in fact impressed some with their concern and response time!
- 2) Although poor, customers were willing to pay for electrical service if it was actually provided!
- 3) "Westernizing" to attract private investment was accepted as a rational, long term plan!
- 4) Our preliminary creative work (billboard, television, direct mail etc.) was viewed positively and, unlike America, there was a real desire to receive sales literature at home!



We now had a strategic creative approach but first... it had to be “localized” (Georgianized)

Our original concept, developed at our American office, called for a Georgian utility worker to be our spokesman. A young man with “energy” and hope for his country’s future. But our Georgian advisors said “no”. Georgians are always interested in the man in charge so....we switched to a grey haired Georgian with tie, jacket and hard hat (pictured right).

We also found that certain English phrases did not translate into Georgian and had to be modified. Of course we did this to maintain the illusion that the promotional messages were created by fellow Georgians who could relate to life in rural Georgia. We also learned that in Georgia:

- women pay most of the bills
- people in general enjoy receiving advertising in the mail
- some towns had good electric service and some very bad
- some Georgians didn’t read Georgian well and should be contacted in Russian or the Azeri language



We had completed our research and “Georgianized” our creative strategy, now, how could we localize our American artwork and video using Georgian suppliers?



Our Georgian video director (center) examines potential location

Business in the Caucasus is a matter of who you know. Or in our case who do our Georgian contacts know. And they fortunately knew everybody including the best Georgian graphic designers, photographers and video directors.

So all should go well, right? Not so fast. Unfortunately, Georgian culture is addicted to arriving late for appointments and completing assignments after the agreed upon date. While this is frustrating, as they say (or might say) “when in Tbilisi, do as the Georgians do”. Americans “live to work” but Georgians “work to live” and love to celebrate life.... even when a deadline looms!



Our Georgian photographer positions model on street level while curious resident looks on

Though stressed.....we at last taste success!

Finally in late November, after heroically surviving every obstacle placed before us, our campaign was ready. Billboards, television, radio and direct mail. Messages both informative and emotional. The marriage of Muir's 20 years of international strategic marketing experience and Georgia's young artistic talent.



"Taking Steps to a Brighter Future" billboard appearing on a rotating basis throughout the Georgian countryside.

"What voters should understand" Georgian language information brochure directed at politicians

Complimentary calendar with local emergency numbers mailed to 650,000 UEDC customers



And what have we learned?

The upside of our Georgian experience is that, because it is so unique and challenging, we have little competition. There are Georgian advertising and marketing firms that know the local culture. There are also gifted young photographers, graphic designers and video directors living in the capital city. But they all lack one essential ingredient and that is the twenty plus years experience an American firm like ours can offer. Knowledge of what basic strategies don't work, which do work and which might work even better.

We are also well prepared for our next assignment in Georgia and the Caucasus because we have established a terrific Georgian business network and can speak with them in their second language, Russian. We also have adjusted to delays by asking for work in advance of the date it is actually due. (brilliant!)

As always, regardless of the business culture, it is never a matter of "whether" something can be done - only a matter of "how".