

How to Market Water Softening Based on Certified *Energy Savings*

By David H. Martin

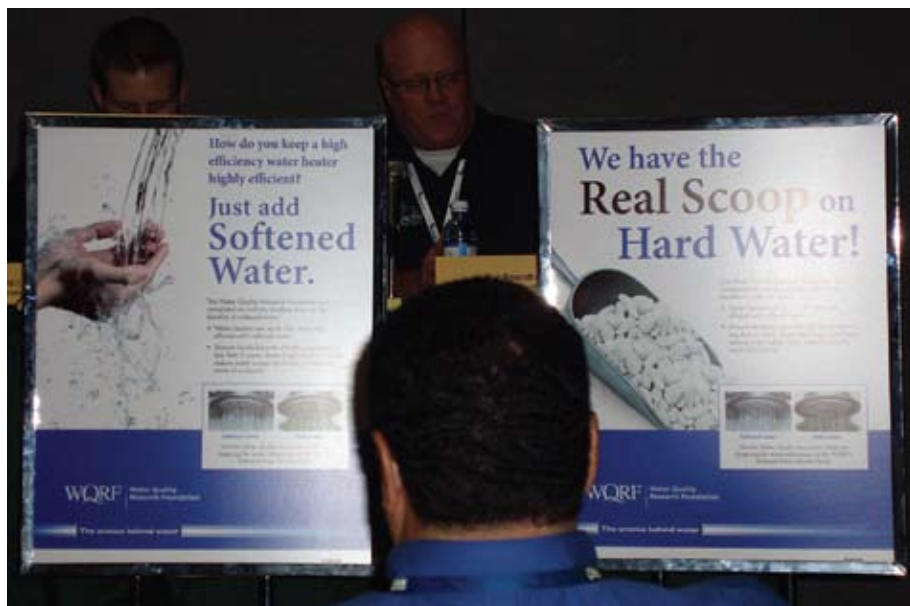
With results of the landmark Battelle Institute study (certifying the energy-saving benefits of water softeners) presented at WQA Aquatech in Orlando, FL, full attention now turns to focusing industry efforts to leverage the exciting new information through training and promotion. Toward that end, a panel of industry leaders delivered a marketing presentation to an enthusiastic audience of dealers and manufacturers, *How to Effectively Market the Softened Water Energy Efficiency Study*. New WQA President, Robert A. 'Bob' Hague of Hague Quality Water led the discussion that included comments by Douglas S. 'Sam' Karge, of Pentair Water and immediate WQA Past-President, Vincent M. Kent of Abendroth Water Conditioning, Inc. Karge chronicled the sharp decline of water softener sales since 2006, while welcoming the promise of the new study. Kent observed, "When you look at the performance benefits that have now been certified by the Battelle study conducted for the Water Quality Research Foundation (WQRF) and WQA, one can now conclude that a water softener is one of the best investments for today's home." (Visit www.wqa.org/battellereport for details of the 253-page report.)

Eric B. Rosenthal, Culligan International's Senior Vice President of Marketing, outlined a strategy and implementation details for training dealer sales personnel, and how dealers will have new tools being developed by WQA to get the word out. Rosenthal stressed that today, consumers want hard facts. New-and-improved claims won't cut it. They want to know specifically why. "That's why the results of the Battelle study on hard-water efficiency versus soft are so important to dealers as we go forward." He claimed that, all by itself, the traditional mainstay benefit such as soap savings doesn't have the impact to bring substantial consumers into the category. "Even claims of money savings relating to using less soap, conditioners and detergents are not enough to move the needle by themselves," said Rosenthal. "But when you add these to new claims of certified energy savings and extended product life for water using appliances, we have a much stronger story. That's what the Battelle study brings to our marketing story. We also need to be seen as objective, and the Battelle Institute's image gives us that important objectivity with the consumer."

Two key messages

What are the two key messages to the consumer? The most important one is: "Even the most efficient water heater you might buy becomes even more efficient when it uses softened water." The second, according to Rosenthal, is "Softened water can prevent a 10-percent drop in energy usage in a tankless water heater in just two years." In other words, in hard water, an 80-percent efficient water heater is only 72-percent efficient in just two years. With softened water, it stays at 80-percent efficiency. Soft water also eliminates the need for regular scale removal. When you look at certain product categories, soft water can amount to a 47-percent decrease in the cost of operating and maintaining the appliance. That's a significant savings in energy use as well as maintenance. Over time, that adds up. And so does the positive effect that soft water use has on the longevity of the home's plumbing and on all water-using appliances. For example, in hard water, a showerhead can become inoperable in a matter of months. It's important to note that Battelle tested some of the most energy-efficient water heaters. Soft water was able to contribute an additional 10 percent in efficiency on top of energy saved by these very efficient appliances. "That's a big deal," said Rosenthal.

WQA has created a series of five new ads that are available for all members to use. All focus on the '10-percent' energy savings, feature the WQA logo, and identify the WQRF as the spon-



sor of the Battelle research study. Each ad includes a visual that quickly identifies a common hard-water problem. All ads in this campaign have a common look and feel and, most importantly, tie the 'saves money' claim to each benefit in the ads. The ads are available on WQA's website on a print-on-demand basis. Note that you can personalize the ads by adding your company name, logo and contact information at the bottom. You can also print copies of your personalized ads for local distribution and use in sales presentations.

Public relations

News of the study creates an excellent PR opportunity for all WQA members marketing water softeners. WQA has created a news release you can use with local media. It contains new industry information that is objective, with third-party verification. "It is information that is tangible and helps people lead greener lives," said Rosenthal. WQA is also developing other marketing tools that will reinforce the '10-percent energy savings' story, including a brochure.

Five key points for consumers

Rosenthal cited five key points dealers will want to share when discussing the results of the Battelle Institute study on soft water benefits:

- 1) The water heater is the second greatest user of household energy.
- 2) Today's homeowners have been switching to energy-efficient appliances.
- 3) Manufacturers of water-using appliances recommend they be used with soft water.
- 4) Appliance manufacturers will void warranties when breakdowns occur from water scale buildup.
- 5) The study sponsored by WQRF indicated up to 20-percent energy savings when soft water is used with today's tankless water heaters. When you add up the savings, in addition to appliance maintenance costs and other tangible soft water benefits identified in earlier industry studies, it's easy to see why no energy-conscious home should be without soft water.



Rosenthal also pointed out that, for dedicated environmentalists, a reduced carbon footprint of 18 percent is achieved on zero-gpg soft water over the same gas water heater operating on 26-gpg hard water for 15 years. He also offered this for acronym lovers:

- F = Function (no clogged showerheads)
 - E = Efficiency (better water-using appliance efficiency)
 - E = Extended appliance life (with soft water)
 - L = Looks better (with no shower stains)
- FEEL** the benefits of soft water!

Rosenthal cautioned WQA members not to deviate from the main message of '10-percent energy savings' when promoting the study findings. "Don't try to find new ways of presenting the data. But if you do come up with another slant, another compelling story, I suggest that you first clear it with WQA, so that we can develop it as a group. Margit Fotre is the WQA person to contact.



"We need to recognize that with this important new sales and marketing tool in the industry's quiver," summarized Rosenthal, "it is now time to grow the category. Battling each other for market share in a downward category will not do. The industry needs to focus less on each other and start using this compelling new data to grow demand so that when a consumer comes to us they will say, 'I'm putting in a new kitchen and will be spending a lot of money on new appliances—and I want to protect them with soft water.'"

Some questions and answers

Is the '10-percent savings' figure strong enough to impress people? Rosenthal: We wanted to use numbers within the two-year timeline of the actual Battelle study, rather than using projected savings numbers down the road, which would be higher, but perhaps less convincing. We chose to be on the conservative side. The 10-percent number is based on 26 grains, a middle-of-the-road figure for hardness.

Is there a perception that only well water is hard and in need of treatment? Since 86 percent of homes today are on municipal water, we can no longer limit our services to people who live with well water. (How else can we expand the market?)

Why was the Battelle study limited to testing ion exchange softeners? Ion exchange is the only technology with an existing ANSI standard for testing water softeners that treat magnesium and calcium in water, defined as hardness.

What about public relations? Is a campaign planned by WQA? The association is planning national media distribution of its PR *NewsWire* release in late April, according to Dave Loveday of WQA. Dealers are encouraged to distribute the release to local newspapers and stations.

Where can dealers get specific information on water heater warranty restrictions? Go to manufacturer websites for specific warranty information on operating with scale.

Will the ads' signature include the WQA logo? While the earlier versions of the ads shown in Orlando showed the WQRF logo, the ads have since been revised to replace it with the more familiar WQA logo.

Will the results of the Battelle study help put a green face on the industry? "I think it absolutely helps," said Rosenthal, in a phone conversation with WC&P. When you use soft water in

Dealer checklist for promoting water softening on certified energy savings

1. Print out and review with sales staff, the entire Battelle Institute study on water heating energy savings and extending the life of water-using home appliances.
2. Download five reproduction-quality ads to a CD and take it to a local printer to make copies for distribution. Instruct your printer to personalize them with your company logo and contact information.
3. Place the same ads on your company website.
4. Download the Battelle study results news release from WQA's website.
5. Order a quantity of new brochures from WQA. Plan to use them in sales presentations and as hand-outs at home shows. Consider a targeted mailing to local plumbers and specifying contractors.
6. Plan a sales training meeting around the Vince Kent video, available from WQA. Use the brochure to help train sales associates.
7. Contact all water softener dealers in your geographical marketing area to gauge interest in planning multi-listing newspaper ads.
8. Distribute the WQA news release to all local newspapers and stations.
9. Invite local plumbers to an educational open-house at your dealership or at an off-site meeting room.
10. Be consistent. Focus all sales and marketing efforts on two key claims:
 - a. Soft water saves 10 percent of water heating energy costs.
 - b. Soft water saves more by extending the life of water-using appliances.

your home, you use fewer chemicals, less water, because it works better, and less energy to heat household water. The carbon footprint for gas storage heaters increases 18 percent when operated on 26-gpg hard water versus zero-gpg softened water.

Will there be formal training for dealers? Culligan's Rosenthal presented the results of the study at the company's annual dealer meeting, held in mid-April in Austin, TX. WQA is also creating a video that can be used in training meetings, featuring immediate WQA Past-President, Vince Kent, discussing the implications of the study for dealers. A new brochure will also be available for training, as well as for consumer education. Edward 'Ned' Jones, former WQA President and President of Gordon Brothers, a Kinetico dealer in Salem, Ohio, told *WC&P* that it's important to make sure salespeople are on the same page and don't misinterpret the results.

Will there be cooperative consumer advertising? None is planned on a national level. However, Jones said he would recommend that dealers selling different brand softeners band together to run regional newspaper ads from the campaign, listing all participating dealers in the region. Rosenthal said that other water softener manufacturers on the marketing committee, as well as Culligan, have indicated they would integrate the results of the Battelle study into their own company marketing programs.

Will there be trade advertising to the industry? Rosenthal said all three industry trade publications (including this one) would be asked to provide ad space to promote the Battelle study marketing program to dealers.

Can you describe the number-one dealer-customer type, based on the Battelle study results? The number-one prospects would be people with homes on 25+ grains hardness water, who are planning to purchase a tankless water heater. Without the addition of soft water, Battelle reported that their new energy-efficient water heaters would likely fail to function within two years. On the other hand, test tankless

heaters showed zero-percent drop-off in operating efficiency on softened water—with no product failures. And, in most cases, the manufacturers' warranties refuse to protect these homeowners without a water softener. For them, owning a water softener is a necessity.

James 'Jamie' Wakem, former WQA President and President of Atlantic Filter Corporation, a West Palm Beach, FL dealer, said his firm plans to spread the word of the drastic effect of hard water on tankless heaters to plumbers, mechanical contractors and specifying engineers in south Florida. "The Battelle study provides ammunition to approach the plumbing industry with proof that a water softener can help improve tankless heater performance and life. This study should help tremendously in creating believers in soft water.

"We've already given copies of the study to our salesmen," added Wakem. "And we're training them to qualify customers by first asking if they have tankless water heaters. If customers answer yes, we then ask, 'Have you heard about the effects of hard-water scaling on these water heaters?'"

Conclusion

The potential importance of the Battelle study on softened water efficiency, sponsored by WQRF, can't be exaggerated in an era of declining water softener sales. Both in terms of increased product performance, credibility and a revitalized sales message, water softener dealers should feel energized by the 253-page report. Today's fact-driven homeowners will welcome its energy-savings and extended-appliance-life messages, if told truthfully and consistently industry wide.

About the author

◆ David Martin is President of Lenzi Martin Marketing, Oak Park, IL, a firm specializing in water improvement and environmental marketing that integrates old and new media. He can be reached at (708) 848-8404 or by email, dmartin@lenzimartin.com