

COMM PRIX Work Plan – AER Launch

Division A. Category: Events and Observances



Overview

The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) ensures the safe, efficient, orderly, and environmentally responsible development of hydrocarbon resources over their entire life cycle. This includes allocating and conserving water resources, managing public lands, and protecting the environment while providing economic benefits for all Albertans.

The AER regulates more than 180 000 wells, 415 000 km of pipelines, 782 gas processing plants, 9 oil sands mines, more than 50 thermal in situ and 200 primary/enhanced schemes, 5 bitumen upgraders, 11 coal mines, and 4 coal processing plants. Approximately 1200 employees live and work in communities across Alberta, with the head office located in Calgary.

The Government of Alberta created the AER in December 2012 through the Responsible Energy Development Act (REDA), which established a single regulatory body for upstream oil and gas development, effectively merging the regulatory responsibilities of the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) with oil and gas related responsibilities from the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development that relate to public lands and the environment.

Launched on June 17, 2013, the AER builds on Alberta's 75-year regulatory tradition and evolves to meet changing industry, public, and governmental needs. The AER brings expanded opportunities for effective, efficient regulation with expanded stakeholder engagement and a vision to be recognized as best-in-class. The launch of the AER offered opportunities to increase public awareness of the regulator while introducing its new functions. It also required a significant amount of work to develop and execute a new brand, mandate and vision both in Alberta and on the world stage.

Launching a new organization, merging two strong regulators, and taking on new responsibilities for air, land, and water were all in themselves significant initiatives. The challenge for the AER was that all of this work was conducted while continuing to operate the ERCB, a massive regulatory organization that processes more than 34 000 applications each year, responds to oil and gas incidents throughout the province, and works to ensure compliance with complex regulatory requirements. Communicating externally, as well as ensuring that staff were engaged and informed throughout the transition required extensive communications planning and execution on behalf of the ERCB communications team (now the AER Office of Public Affairs).

Stakeholder Analysis

The Office of Public Affairs (OPA) drew on more than a decade of quantitative research to determine a baseline for opinions and perceptions about the regulator. This data was used to inform focus testing on existing publications and to direct research into the new brand and logo for the regulator. This research allowed OPA to establish an awareness baseline and determine what stakeholders expected from a regulator, including areas of concern, communications preferences, and desired attributes.

Prior research indicated that Albertans who are familiar with the regulator expressed more confidence in industry's orderly development, in environmental protection, and in compliance assurance. Awareness of the regulator, however, did not extend to the general public, and Albertans did not proactively seek information about the regulator unless they were directly affected by oil and gas development. These statistics suggested certain challenges for launch communications, which needed to convey information on the new regulatory system to an audience who is not familiar with the previous organization.

Internally, employees were surveyed on their awareness and understanding of the move to the single regulator following three key events: the initial announcement of the change in October 2012, a series of six staff information sessions on REDA held in February 2013, and a town hall for AER employees hosted by the incoming AER chair and CEO in May 2013. In each case, survey questions focused on measuring employee understanding of the move to the new regulator and its mandate/structure. Feedback from each survey informed the development of future internal communication strategies about the transition to the single regulator.

Strategy & Planning

To control the many variables of the launch, OPA created a 106-page communications strategy detailing objectives, strategies, risks, stakeholders, deliverables, tactics, and timelines. OPA worked with stakeholders (employees, landowners, companies, and government departments) to communicate the upcoming changes, even as the identity for the new regulator—the content of the communications—was still being developed.

The team used a storyline approach for the launch, which allowed consistent materials to be created quickly with a minimized approval process. The storyline focused on the AER's strong 75-year tradition of energy regulation, and it outlined the changes that would occur after the establishment of the AER. All print and electronic materials adhered to this storyline, and graphics—including the new logo—were designed to be consistent with the messages it laid out.

In addition, ten tactical communications plans were included as appendices of the strategy to address a wide range of initiatives such as new regulations, new publications, web design, social and digital media, special events, internal communications, and change management.

The communications strategy also specified timelines and roles for everybody involved in the launch, ensuring that no detail would be omitted and that events were of a high quality, consistent with the launch of such a high-profile organization.

Goals and Objectives

The strategy's goal was to ensure that all stakeholders would be aware of the launch of the AER; would understand its role in regulating Alberta's upstream oil, oil sands, natural gas, and coal development; and would know how to contact the AER for emergencies or information.

A number of objectives were outlined within the strategy and its appendices; the higher priority objectives were

- to increase the awareness of the AER and its role, from 44 per cent (survey conducted by ERCB in 2010) to 50 per cent (a baseline target for future communications efforts),
- to launch and position the AER as a new entity with significant differences from the ERCB, as measured by media analysis (75 per cent media coverage that is balanced or positive in tone during and after the launch), and
- to increase staff awareness and understanding of the AER and its new governance structure and mandate, from 57 per cent (survey in October 2012) to 70 per cent by June 2013.

Execution

The OPA team primarily drew on in-house talent to plan and execute the launch. The team consisted of designers, editors, web publishers, communications advisors, media relations advisors, digital media experts, writers, and co-op students. Leading up to launch, OPA worked with the new AER chair and CEO to design a new corporate graphic identity, logo, and storyline. With only six weeks until the proclamation date (June 17), the final version was approved and the team moved quickly to replace the previous visual identity in over 70 different locations, including internal web content, letterhead, signage across the province, regulatory documents, safety equipment, and corporate promotional clothing and items. The team also designed and created a new website with new navigation and updated content that launched the weekend before proclamation, allowing stakeholders easy access to information about the new regulator. Social and digital media played a large role in helping to explain the new regulator as YouTube videos and a new Twitter feed were launched, as well as an updated LinkedIn presence. Training sessions were held for frontline staff to enable them to communicate externally about the changes in a consistent and confident manner.

One of the most significant projects was the "road show" OPA planned, which included 13 launch events to officially open all AER locations across the province, with the official launch event at head office in Calgary. Each event required AER-branded equipment (e.g., podium, flags, displays) as well as communications collateral, including news releases, media advisories, speaking notes, event scenarios, and invitations.

The AER's initial implementation phase on June 17 went smoothly, but as heavy rains hit southern Alberta, the AER road show and subsequent launch activities were jeopardized. On June 20 the AER responded to flooding in Turner Valley that caused a pipeline leak. The next day the AER, like most of southern Alberta, was faced with unprecedented flood waters and a complete shutdown of its Calgary head office, during one of Canada's worst natural disasters. The OPA team immediately mobilized to address the direct impact of the floods by implementing its crisis communications plan to respond to oil and gas incidents, keep more than 700 displaced staff informed, and to reschedule the launch events. Without access to the office, the OPA team set up shop in the vice president's kitchen and worked remotely to issue 11 news releases responding to flood-related incidents, respond to 14 different media outlets, and cancel or reschedule 13 events, some of which were planned for that week.

OPA successfully rescheduled every launch event across the province. In less than three weeks after floods started, the OPA team travelled over 7200 kilometres in nine days to officially launch all of the new AER locations. Each event was followed with a news release and a tweet, proclaiming the creation of the AER to wider audiences throughout the province

and across the country. During this time, OPA also worked to launch the new online incident reporting tool, an initiative to provide improved public notice of energy-related incidents reported to the new regulator.

An extensive internal campaign to familiarize employees with the changing structures and identities ran before, during, and after the launch. The team created a splash page for the internal website, held several town hall webcasts with the CEO and executive team engaging employees in each of the organization's 13 offices, sent out widespread staff emails, distributed welcome packages on the day of proclamation, arranged for internal milestone and celebration events, developed a special intranet site, and created a monthly newsletter to keep employees informed about changes happening throughout the transition. To encourage employees to advocate the new brand, OPA ran a jacket trade-in program, where staff could exchange their ERCB-branded jackets for new ones with the AER brand.

The AER launch was delivered on time and came in under budget. The budget is summarized below (for the full budget, please refer to the appendix). Please note that some budget items are for phase two and three of the launch; in some areas, budget allocation was not spent due to the cancellation of events because of the floods.

Category	Initial Budget	Spent	Remaining
Launch/Rollout	\$100,000	\$10,655	\$89,345
Advertising	\$300,000	\$155,117	\$144,883
Supplies	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0
Facilities & Rentals	\$100,000	\$26,670	\$73,330
Visual Elements	\$65,000	\$82,159	(\$17,159)
Printing	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0
Casual Staffing	\$400,000	\$400,000	\$0
Research, Focus Testing, and Evaluation	\$75,000	\$34,150	\$40,850
Consulting	\$125,000	\$137,736	(\$12,736)
Supplies	\$30,000	\$95,897	(\$65,897)
Overtime	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0
Catering, Meals, and Travel	\$50,000	\$5,710	\$44,290
TOTALS	\$1,345,000	\$1,098,094	\$296,906

Results

Despite the national and international attention attracted by the southern Alberta floods, July omnibus testing indicated a 38 per cent awareness level for the AER. Research conducted in January 2014 indicated an awareness level of 61 per cent amongst Albertans, which is a 17 per cent increase from 2010, exceeding our objective by 11 per cent.

Media coverage was measured using the CPRS Media Relations Rating Points system (MRP). Of the 129 articles published throughout the launch, 87 per cent were either balanced or positive in tone, exceeding our objective by 12 per cent. A separate media analysis report was crafted to evaluate coverage from the flood and subsequent spills. In one week (June 21–28), 53 articles mentioned the AER, 96 per cent of which were balanced or positive in tone.

Internally, a survey was sent to staff after the town hall in May. The results showed that 98 per cent of respondents found the session helped them to better understand the transition to the AER, and a majority agreed that it helped them find answers to their questions. These results were a major improvement from a similar survey sent to staff after the initial announcement in October 2012, where only 57 per cent indicated the session helped them better understand what becoming a single regulator entailed, and 34 per cent indicated the sessions helped them get answers to their questions. Over 500 employees changed their voicemail and email signatures within a week of the AER launch, and 121 staff (12 per cent) participated in the jacket trade-in.

These metrics helped us to quantify the results of the strategy, and increase awareness and understanding with our internal and external audiences. The full launch of the AER is being executed in three phases; phase one objectives were focused on awareness, whereas phase two and three objectives are focused on acceptance and trust of the regulator. On May 27, 2014, OPA accepted two National Awards of Excellence (Silver for 'Special Events' and Gold for 'Best Multimedia Projects') from the Canadian Public Relations Society for this project (www.cprs.ca/news) and on June 10, 2014, the team will receive a Gold Quill Award of Merit from the International Association of Business Communicators (www.iabc.com/awards).