



Fighting for Our Future Bashing Gas is Not the Answer

by *Richard Goldberg*

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Like many of you, I have been dismayed by the free ride given the natural gas industry by the government, media, etc. when it comes to the negative impact of gas on the environment. Natural gas has been anointed the great white hope without having a glove laid on it.

In the face of this, many of us have wanted to shout, “Hold on just a cotton picken’ minute! Don’t you know that natural gas is made up of methane, which is a gazillion times worse for global warming than carbon dioxide. The only thing natural about it is that it comes from dead dinosaurs, just like oil. And yes, Ms. Speaker, it is too a fossil fuel.”

We somehow believe that if they only knew the truth about natural gas, they’d stop loving it so much, and stop picking on poor old us. And so there are efforts afoot to launch an offensive to attack gas as a greenhouse culprit.

There’s just one problem with this premise. It won’t work. Any more than telling your 15-year-old daughter who is infatuated with a cool senior that she should drop him, that he’s no good for her and that he’s only using her for, well, just one thing. Because she doesn’t want to hear it. And neither does the American public or government want to hear it about natural gas—certainly not from us.

Let’s face reality

Let’s face reality here. America wants a “natural gas solution.” We want something that will allow us to have the perception, if not the reality, that we can make an impact on this potential environmental disaster, and reduce our dependence on the Middle East. It may not be perfect, but it’s better than what we have now. It works for a wide spectrum of the American population and power elite. The new shale drilling technology offers jobs and new tax revenue in many states, and the prospect of energy independence. And it’s backed by BIG money, even more so with the proposed Exxon acquisition of XTO.

Consider the recent AP story, “Gas Could Be the Cavalry in Global Warming Fight,” which was the lead on Yahoo, and

appeared in hundreds of newspapers. It starts off this way: “An unlikely source of energy has emerged to meet international demands that the United States do more to fight global warming: It’s cleaner than coal, cheaper than oil and a 90-year supply is under our feet. It’s natural gas.” And it goes on to make the case for the attractiveness of gas, even citing examples of utilities who have dropped multi-billion dollar plans to clean up their coal-fired plants now that the national pro-gas agenda seems ascendant.

The bus has left the station—hop on board

No amount of “gas isn’t so good” advertising (and certainly not the amount our little industry can generate) will change the political calculus of this administration or most of Congress, or their echoes on a state/regional level. And more important, it doesn’t make us look any better. If our biggest worry is that we will be regulated or taxed into second-class citizenship, then our strategy has to be very targeted. We need to take our emotions out of the equation. Particularly, we need to resist the temptation to spend our scarce money on advertising that makes us feel better, but won’t move the needle.

Rather than trying to poke holes in their methane air balloon, we need to hop along for the ride. The one message I believe we should be concentrating on is that our **new fuel** is as natural as gas, environmentally acceptable and more powerful for their home. (An interesting tag line could be “Oil heat—empower your comfort,” but the specific is not the key point here.)

It is a strategy that worked brilliantly for the pork industry, and led to a complete repositioning of their product to an entire generation. They didn’t run ads that said “Chicken can give you salmonella poisoning too.” Instead, recognizing that the public perceived chicken to be a more healthy option for meat eaters interested in better health, they tagged along for the ride.

Pork became “the other white meat.” And under that banner, they were able to share surprising information about the fat and cholesterol content of pork that changed our

perceptions and made pork a reasonable alternative. And that's what we really need to happen here. Help the public, particularly the policy makers, start viewing the **new heating oil** as a reasonable enough alternative that they don't try and regulate it into history, or abandon it as an inefficient "has-been." It will take all the funds and focus we can muster just to get that message across, especially in light of the almost \$100 million the natural gas industry is spending to make their message clear.

We don't need to wait—we need to focus

The combination of higher percentage bio-fuel and ultra-low sulfur at 15 ppm gives us a legitimate pork story to tell. The coordinated effort of the oil heat universe to get government mandates ultimately requiring this is a huge step in the right direction. But we don't need to wait for it to become reality to start heralding our new fuel's arrival, any more than GM or Ford are waiting for the reality of its electric and hybrid cars hitting the showrooms in force.

We need to start trumpeting our future. **We need to get going on it now, even if it's not quite here yet.** We need to give our customers hope, and regulators pause.

We should be targeting all of our funds on this message and the efficiency and cost-saving it will bring our customers. Because it is the latter that really drives incremental customer decisions. The data show that very few people will rip out their oil systems because they think they're saving the earth. But they absolutely will do it if they think oil prices will continue to rise and oil equipment is inefficient.

The efficiency issue is where many utilities are pounding us now. If we allow our current efficiency disadvantage to become permanently rooted in the public's mind, then we are really in deep doo-doo. We need to show customers that in the near future, oil will be a super-efficient, clean, renewable alternative, with more Btu's, comfort, safety and service. They need to know "It's coming."

The country needs us

It makes sense for the country not to put too many of its eggs in one basket. The U.S. needs a viable heating oil industry as part of diversified landscape that delivers America's warmth. The increasing use of natural gas is likely to stress the supply system in the short term, leading to pricing and supply issues. And there's the waste of ripping out perfectly good oil heat systems, particularly using our tax dollars.

Our future depends on reformulating our fuel. It also depends on a crystal clear marketing focus right now to convince "the powers that be" and our customers that this new fuel will meet all their needs and require no outpouring of federal money, and it won't cost customers a ton.

We will be able to trumpet the cool, new, condensing heating equipment, which is both super-efficient and super-clean. We'll be able to change the way we do "cleanings" as a direct and obvious result. In the public mind, the legitimacy precedent has already been set. It's called leaded vs. unleaded fuel.

We will be more natural than natural gas, we will be renewable—and then we can trumpet our other advantages. Like more Btu's per heating unit. Like safety and service, and choice. We will need to keep servicing the hell out of people. And wait for the shine inevitably to come off the natural gas apple.

But none of this will happen if we don't spend every ounce of resources we have both on improving our fuel, and telling a positive story about its future now. So for now, please put away your pictures of dead trees, your "go gas, go boom," and your statistics on methane leakage. Because even though they're true, it's hard to see that they will make a difference.

Just 'cause they're uglier doesn't make us any more attractive. We need to go to beauty school.

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