

**Valley Water**  
**Messaging Focus Groups - Businesses**  
**Qualitative Research Report**  
**August, 5 2021**



# Contents

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>Slide Number</b>
Background & Objectives	4
Methodology	5
Detailed Findings - Attitudes & Behaviors	6
Detailed Findings -- Website	17
Detailed Findings - Messages & Images	21
Awareness of Valley Water	29
Implications and Recommendations	31
Appendix	36

# Introduction


# Background and Objectives

- ▶ In July of 2021, the Governor of California declared a “drought emergency” that included Santa Clara County
- ▶ Given that the mission of Valley Water is to provide safe water for Santa Clara County and to manage watersheds, creeks and dams, research was undertaken to understand the attitudes, behaviors and openness to messaging of local residential, business and commercial property managers in addressing this emergency
- ▶ The primary goal of the research was to obtain feedback from managers on a selection of conservation and drought-related messages and images that are a key part of Valley Water communications
- ▶ A second goal of the research was to understand what property/facility managers believe a drought means for them, as well as to explore the actions their businesses might be taking and be willing to take to mitigate the effects of the drought
- ▶ Thirdly, the research included an exploration of manager awareness of and reactions to the website [Watersavings.org](https://www.watersavings.org) as well as its offerings and messages

# Methodology

- ▶ A single focus group was conducted the afternoon of August 5, 2021 at the Nichols Research focus group facility in Sunnyvale, CA
  - ▶ All participants who were recruited were screened to ensure that they were managers of properties or facilities operating within Santa Clara County
  - ▶ In addition, participants were qualified as follows:
    - ▶ Must have input into or be the manager making the final decisions regarding business operations that might impact the environment
    - ▶ Include a mix those who have taken from no steps to conserve to some steps to conserve water over the past year
    - ▶ Include those who believe that water resources need protection, together with any who might believe that nature will replenish what is needed
    - ▶ Include at least three who are aware of various rebate programs
  - ▶ Participants included a mix of gender, education, marital status, age, income, urban vs suburban vs rural, type of personal residence (home, apartment, etc.) and ethnicity

## Detailed Findings: Attitudes & Behaviors



# Water Companies have responsibilities beyond just providing water - especially in times of drought

- ▶ These property managers believe that the primary responsibility of water companies is to *deliver clean water safely in an affordable way*
- ▶ Water companies are also expected to:
  - ▶ *“Manage for the future”*
  - ▶ *“Improve the infrastructure”*
  - ▶ *“Partner with the community”*
  - ▶ *“Coexist with conservationists”*

*NB: italics indicate participants’ own words and statements*

# All agree that there is a drought emergency in Santa Clara County and all are taking steps to mitigate

- ▶ When they hear the word ‘drought,’ they associate it both with causes and impacts:
  - ▶ *Global warming, climate change*
  - ▶ *Water conservation*
  - ▶ *Wildfires, health concerns (smoke),*
  - ▶ *Water shortages, lack of water resources, rationing, low water at dams*
  - ▶ *Increased water costs, increased rates*
  - ▶ *Decreased curb appeal, letting lawns go brown, drought-tolerant landscaping*
  - ▶ *Always an issue in the West*

# These managers believe that everyone must take Climate Change seriously

They associate the phrase 'Climate Change' with these phrases, words, concepts:

- ▶ *Global warming*
- ▶ *Must prepare for the future*
- ▶ *Must listen to the science*
- ▶ *Severe weather changes / erratic weather year round*
- ▶ *Heat, hot summers*
- ▶ *Increased wildfire activity*
- ▶ *Decrease in available resources*
- ▶ *Drier winters*
- ▶ *Flooding*
- ▶ *Receding glaciers*
- ▶ *Long term effects*
- ▶ *Most important, top of the list of concerns*
- ▶ *Must be educating versus politicizing*



# Managers consider ‘Water Conservation’ a top issue that they associate with actions that can be taken to mitigate

They associate ‘water conservation’ with the following words, phrases, concepts:



*Planning to improve systems / Plan for future*



*Being smart / being proactive*



*Educating in how to conserve water / ways to conserve*



*Be mindful of usage / make sure water not wasted*



*Understand water as a limited resource*



*Brown grass / decrease irrigation duration*




*Rationing*



*Quick showers*



## All are experiencing impacts of drought on the properties / facilities they manage

- 
- ▶ On multi-unit properties (Condos, Apartments, Townhomes, etc.) that are managed by these professional managers, the impact is obvious:
    - ▶ Reduced curb appeal due to browned out lawns / landscaping
    - ▶ Increased mulch areas
    - ▶ Resistance from residents who may water their own grass
      - ▶ Cases where residents have “sprayed” the brown lawn green
    - ▶ Residents may be saving water by not flushing toilets which have resulted in stained fixtures which must then be replaced
  - ▶ Similar landscape issues arise on office / commercial properties they manage

# In reviewing list of water conservation steps, managers are familiar and implementing many

## List provided to participants:

- ▶ develop a written water conservation plan on using less water,
- ▶ better maintenance,
- ▶ engage – inform employees / get everyone on board and be open to taking feedback/action based on what employees see and report on re: water waste, etc.,
- ▶ conduct a water audit,
- ▶ reduce landscape water usage,
- ▶ convert landscape to drought tolerant plants, (brown) landscape,
- ▶ use mulch in landscaping,
- ▶ install timers and controls,
- ▶ install moisture sensors to avoid watering areas that do not need it,
- ▶ check sprinkler coverage areas and irrigate in the morning or early evening,
- ▶ retrofit existing business irrigation equipment to those with higher efficiency,
- ▶ make use of graywater and/or recycled water (harvest rainwater),
- ▶ have new meters to monitor usage and help detect leaks,
- ▶ use indoor water saving devices such as low flow restrictors, faucet aerators and toilet flappers/low flow toilets in restrooms and break areas,
- ▶ use water coolers with disposable paper cups,
- ▶ installing Energy star and WaterSense products,
- ▶ install tankless water heaters,
- ▶ install insulation blankets,
- ▶ wait to clean equipment until there is a full load,
- ▶ encourage users to use less water by turning off faucets before rinsing



# All are taking steps to conserve water

- ▶ These property and facility managers explain that they are taking numerous steps to save water including most provided on the list:
  - ▶ Equipment to control property watering (Note: some through San Jose rebate program)
  - ▶ Moving toward drought tolerant landscape plants and mulch
  - ▶ Conducting water audits
  - ▶ Installing low flow fixtures (toilets, faucets, shower heads)
  - ▶ Installing low flow and tankless water heaters
- ▶ They do believe that they can have an impact, even if small
  - ▶ *“If we apply all of these, I believe it could make a dent”*
  - ▶ *“Small changes, big impact”*

# Managers do agree that it is fair to ask businesses to conserve water

- ▶ However, some suggested actions are not realistic:
  - ▶ *“How are you going to get greywater?”*
- ▶ A few object that the impact of their efforts to conserve pales in comparison to:
  - ▶ *Agricultural water usage*
  - ▶ *Unlimited or uncontrolled development in Santa Clara*
- ▶ They do agree that there is *“no easy answer”* to
  - ▶ *Increased population / development*
  - ▶ *Loss of snowpack*
- ▶ Many of these managers are frustrated when tenants or owners or bosses push back on the increased costs (20% or so) of water
  - ▶ And while there is currently a drought emergency, most believe the drought conditions to be permanent
  - ▶ Actions therefore *need to be taken on a long-term basis*, and
  - ▶ *Everyone needs to step up, and our residents [tenants, etc.] need to be educated*

# Managers believe that businesses should be rewarded for conserving water

- ▶ How would they like to be rewarded?
  - ▶ Discounts on water bills
    - ▶ Those not conserving do not receive discounts
  - ▶ Property tax discounts
  - ▶ Discounts on public projects
  - ▶ Items / rebates to help conserve
- ▶ And no one is tired of talking about drought because it is their job, and it is *“incredibly important”*

# The messages they need in a nutshell, plus where they would look to find the messages

- ▶ The messages that these property/facility managers tell us that they need to hear come down to money and education:
  - ▶ *You're going to help me save money*
  - ▶ *You're going to educate me (e.g., on best ways to conserve water)*
  - ▶ *You tell me - I'm not the expert! (e.g., expert advice on efficient and cost-effective ways to conserve water)*
- ▶ They would expect to hear the messages - their information sources from:
  - ▶ *Social media*
  - ▶ *Association sites*
  - ▶ *Newsletters*
  - ▶ *Outreach from manufacturers / water providers*
- ▶ Note: they point out that the electric company phones them with information; manufacturers reach out; but they do not hear from their water companies



# Detailed Findings: Website

# Awareness of [Watersavings.org](http://Watersavings.org) website is essentially non-existent among these business managers

- ▶ Several noticed that they had been routed to the ValleyWater.org website
  - ▶ Very few had heard of “Valley Water”
  - ▶ And virtually no one knows what Valley Water actually does
  - ▶ There is confusion as to the relationship between Valley Water and watersavings.org
- ▶ Reaction to the website was quite positive
  - ▶ *“It would be helpful for educating my tenants”*
  - ▶ *“I work with seniors and this [design] would be good for them”*
  - ▶ *“I see the word ‘rebate’ and that attracts me right away”*
  - ▶ *“It’s user friendly, so it’s good across the board”*
- ▶ Only one participant objected to the look and feel as *“static and dated”*
- ▶ Only one says that it would be unlikely he would ever go to this site



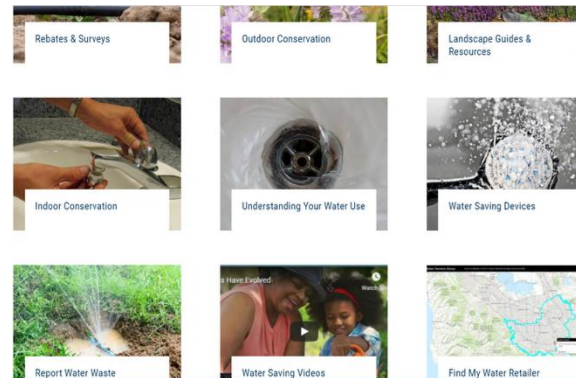
# There were many suggestions for improving awareness of and design for the website content to make it more useful

## ▶ Suggestions to raise awareness of the website include:

- ▶ Highlight the *“free gear and the rebates”*
- ▶ Get ‘Valley Water’, what they do, and what the website does covered by the news
- ▶ Get a team together and *“hit the ground running”* by phoning businesses, or sending out flyers
  - ▶ Reach out the way that the electric company does
- ▶ *Put at the very top a description of what they do”* to increase awareness of Valley Water’s mission

## ▶ Suggestions to improve design of the website

- ▶ Several were put off by having to go to multiple tabs
  - ▶ Put a *“for property managers”* box on top of home page
  - ▶ *“This is a lot to go through to find things”*
  - ▶ Put a small menu drop box on each tab so you can *“go down the list to find what you want”*
  - ▶ *“If it’s important, put it on top”* (e.g., rebates)



## ▶ Most agree that, now that they know, they would go to the site, and tell colleagues about it

# Suggestions to drive traffic to website

- ▶ The primary need is to build awareness of Valley Water, its mission, and its website [Watersavings.org](http://Watersavings.org)
  - ▶ If Valley Water can provide means for property related businesses to save money, these managers will be very interested
  - ▶ An overview of the business rebate program at the top of the opening page will definitely arouse interest
- ▶ Suggestions to drive traffic include:
  - ▶ Local water company sites should have a link to [Watersavings.org](http://Watersavings.org)
  - ▶ The link and information should appear on local water bills
  - ▶ The Valley Water outreach team should be engaging businesses in the area
    - ▶ Starting with the large Silicon Valley companies
    - ▶ *“Get those big tech companies on your side”*



## Detailed Findings: Messages & Images

# Participants offer more suggestions for messaging

- ▶ Participants were sorted into two groups and each group worked to build potential messages
  - ▶ As the activity began, objections arose due to the lack of knowledge about Valley Water
    - ▶ *“I don’t know my relationship with them, so I don’t know what to say”*
- ▶ Group A suggests practical steps, rather than message content:
  - ▶ *“A website for your rebates”*
  - ▶ *“Put the information at Lowes and Home Depot”*
  - ▶ *“Tell all the plumbers”*
- ▶ Group B offers message content themes around efforts to change behavior
  - ▶ *“You can’t change climate change, but you can change your usage”*
  - ▶ *“We can change what we do”* illustrated by
    - ▶ *Showing a timelapse video of green California to today and back*
  - ▶ *“Make it personal - ask ‘what about the next generation?’”*
  - ▶ *“Find a local star or rapper to be the spokesperson”*

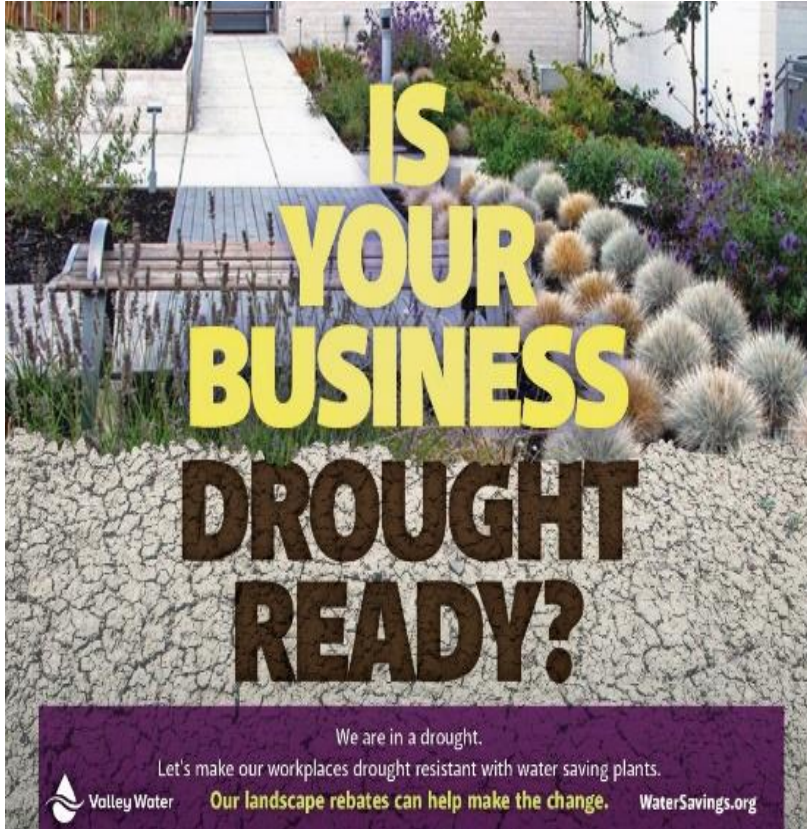


# Reactions to the graphics and messages not negative, but many say they would not even bother to read them

- ▶ There were distinct preferences among the images
  - ▶ Note that preferences differed strongly from those of residential consumers in prior (July 2021) focus groups
  - ▶ All agree, however, that the “purple box” and website URL are too small to be noticed
- ▶ Business managers feel that taglines and messages should be stronger and more direct with a distinct call to improved business results
  - ▶ Present a “*call to action*”
  - ▶ Draw attention to rebates
  - ▶ Messages should “*shock people*” “*tell people the truth*”
    - ▶ “*Don’t use fuzzy words and pictures*”
    - ▶ “*If we want to get out of this, here’s what we need to do*”
    - ▶ “*We can save you money*”
    - ▶ “*You better wake up! This is real*”
    - ▶ “*What can we do now to do more - we are already doing the obvious*”
    - ▶ “*A fire orange sky, dry reservoirs, etc. - not pretty pictures!*”



# Graphic is appealing but confusing; message is too weak



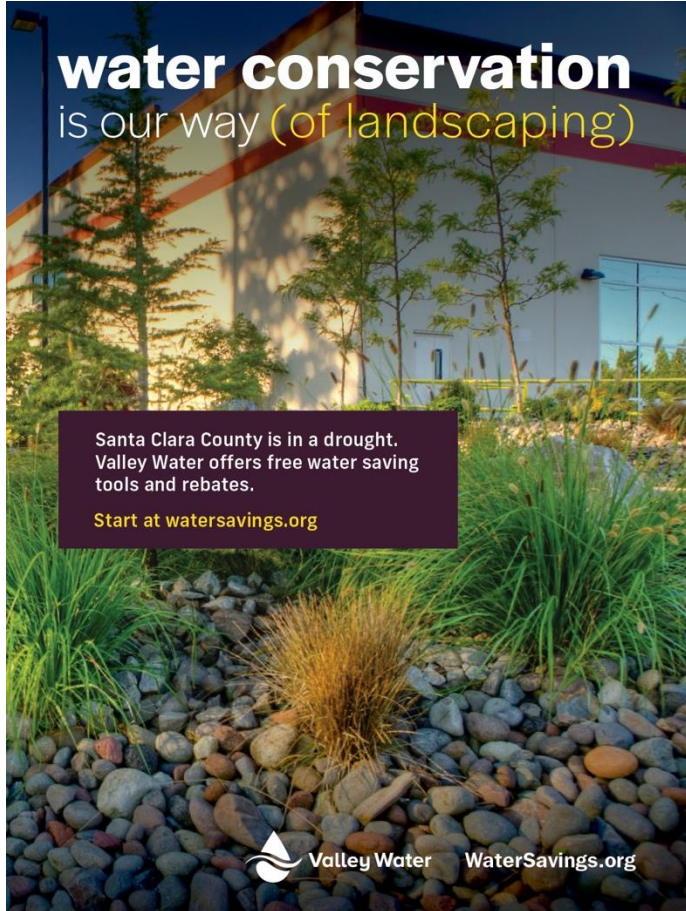
- ▶ This graphic is somewhat appealing; however, several are confused by the graphic
  - ▶ *“Is it two pictures? Or just one where the bottom half shows the job unfinished?”*
  - ▶ *“The graphic needs a distinct/red line differentiating the landscaped area from the drought area”*
- ▶ Most consider the purple box to be too small, it’s text too small, and the link to the website lost
- ▶ Many consider the message to be *“too weak”*
- ▶ These managers believe that the message should be more direct, such as:
  - ▶ *“Are you ready for water-rationing?”*
  - ▶ *“Are you ready for cost increases?”*
- ▶ Note: in contrast to residential participants in previous groups, business managers embrace the *“fear”* aspects of this drought image

## Message and “pretty” image are “too subtle” to be effective



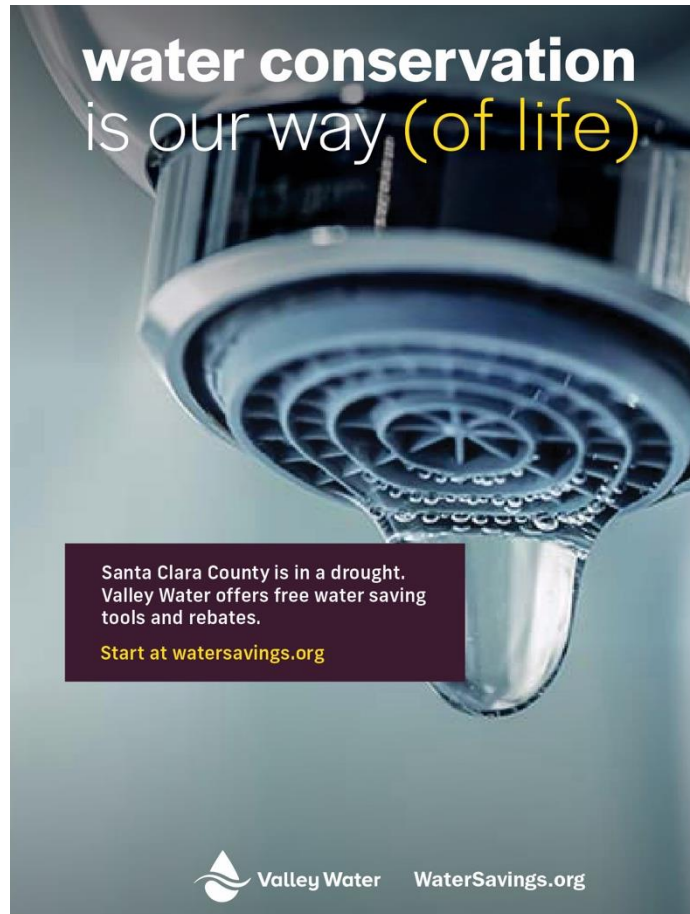
- ▶ Placement of the purple information box is improved in this image, but the box itself as well as its text is too small
- ▶ Further, the taglines “do not get the message across”
  - ▶ “This does not reach me”
  - ▶ “This is doing nothing for me”
- ▶ There is also some pushback regarding the image as it appears that “these people are watering their plants”
- ▶ This is “way too subtle” for these hardheaded business managers whose goal is to operate efficiently and reduce costs

# The image, though attractive, does not drive the message, and the message is too weak



- ▶ Many find the aspirational aspects of this image quite appealing:
  - ▶ *“This shows what it could be”*
  - ▶ *“This is what it could look like if you invest in drought-resistant landscaping*
- ▶ However, the tagline message does not speak to property managers who are far more interested in rebates and economic efficiency
- ▶ Again, participants want to see a relevant *“call to action”* in the message
- ▶ Placement of the purple information box is thought to be better in this graphic
  - ▶ However, again, text is too small; the word ‘rebates’ needs to stand out

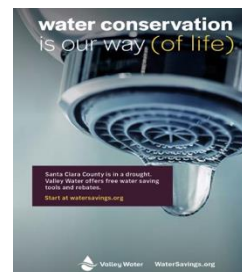
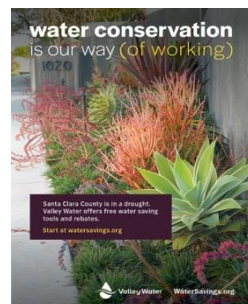
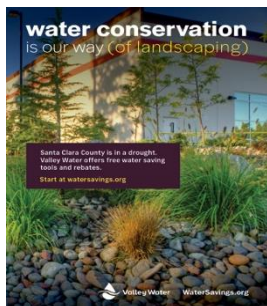
This image is “*nothing new*” and is a mismatch with the tagline



- ▶ Water saving fixtures/faucets are “*nothing new*” to these managers; hence, they have little interest in and little to say about this image
- ▶ Again, the tagline does not speak to these business- people, nor does it map to what they want to hear about rebates
- ▶ The purple box, again, is too small such that the text and the word ‘rebates’ are barely discernable

# Business managers prefer the strongest graphic

- ▶ The key theme for residential participants in previous groups was the message: “*Water Conservation is our way of life*”
- ▶ By contrast, the “way of life” theme has little to no appeal for business-people
  - ▶ There is far stronger interest in bottom line impacts of the drought on their businesses:
    - ▶ Rebates, audits, what drought-resistant landscaping could be, together with affordable ways to accomplish these
    - ▶ Hence, the “Is your business drought ready?” graphic is considered the best of the lot
      - ▶ But would be improved with a definitive line separating the top half and bottom
      - ▶ And a better message might be a more “in your face” call to action
- ▶ The “way of life” themed images are the “*next best*” but would be much improved with a more business-relevant tagline



- ▶ This graphic is dismissed as “*nothing new*”

# Detailed Findings: Awareness of Valley Water

# Only a few have heard of Valley Water; None understand what Valley Water actually does

- ▶ Confusion persists even after detailed description is read to participants
  - ▶ *“Are they like the Bay Area transportation district?”*
  - ▶ *“I’m still confused”*
- ▶ Again, many suggest that Valley Water:
  - ▶ Place an *“easy to follow description on their homepage that explains what they do”*
  - ▶ Build understanding and awareness through outreach to businesses, flyers, free water bottles, standard PR (newspapers, radio, TV interviews)
- ▶ In a prescient comment, one property manager observes that
  - ▶ *“It is a terrible shame that they have to hire a marketing firm and do all this research to figure out how to reach people who should know better about water conservation. It is just sad”*

# Implications and Recommendations

# Implications and recommendations

- ▶ Everyone of these business managers is very aware of the drought, the drought emergency, and the effects of climate change
  - ▶ While they understand that large water users (such as agriculture) are contributors to the drought, they also understand, very well, that their businesses have a responsibility to conserve water
    - ▶ From a business perspective, their responsibility is to control costs and take advantage of programs and rebates for water conservation
      - ▶ While also preserving “curb appeal“ (at least for residential properties)
  - ▶ Most are already aware of and have actually implemented the most common steps to conserve water - low-flow showerheads, faucets and toilets, etc. - they would like more detailed information about additional steps they can take:
    - ▶ How to access and use greywater
    - ▶ What rebates are available (NB: some have had problems getting their rebates from San Jose water and have developed a bit of skepticism towards rebates)
    - ▶ What “free gear” is available and how to access it
    - ▶ How to install drought tolerant landscaping -- affordably

# Implications and recommendations (cont'd)

- ▶ The website is reasonably well received
  - ▶ However, programs and rebates for businesses must be easier to locate on the site for sustained interest and to drive traffic
  - ▶ It was not at all clear to participants how they would rapidly find business-relevant content
  - ▶ A clear description of the purview of Valley Water should be included at the top of the homepage
- ▶ In strong contrast to previous residential groups in July 2021, these business managers prefer that messages and graphics “*shock*” the audience - “*tell the truth about drought*”
  - ▶ The “way of life” taglines and images are considered far too “*fuzzy*” and “*weak*” and “*pretty*”
    - ▶ *Better to show “orange skies from fire” or “drying reservoirs”*
  - ▶ Messages that might speak to these property/facility/construction managers should address their needs for cost savings and efficiency
  - ▶ Messages might also include affordable steps they can take to conserve water “*beyond the obvious*”
- ▶ The persistent theme of “*education / tell us, as you are the experts*” is one that is welcomed by property/facility managers when it comes to water conservation and might be considered for messaging or website content
  - ▶ Variations on this theme include desire to have expert advice on “*managing for the future,*” means of incentivizing to conserve water, dealing with increasing costs of water to remain a profitable business, ways of using water conservation methods to save money

## Implications and recommendations (cont'd)

- ▶ It is quite clear that the underlying issues for Valley Water are low awareness of Valley Water, the website and its offerings and non-existent understanding of what the organization does
  - ▶ While feedback on website and message content is very useful, it appears that the primary efforts of marketing will need to be directed toward building that awareness and understanding. People need a reason to look for or otherwise visit the site
    - ▶ Participants suggest multiple methods including active outreach to businesses large and small, partnering with large Silicon Valley companies, traditional PR (radio, TV interviews, newspapers), posters and flyers, free water bottles, etc.

# Appendix

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Discussion Guide



Recruiting  
Screeners