

Better Living Through Locating

I always got a kick out of the term “designating utilities.” That’s what the subsurface utility engineering industry calls locating buried pipes and cables. SUE refers to a person who locates (designates) utilities as a designator. But it’s not as though these engineer types don’t use the term “locating.” That’s what they call exposing buried pipes and cables. Therefore, using a vacuum excavator to expose utilities is known as locating utilities and a person who performs this task is known as a locator. Wouldn’t it then have to follow that a vacuum excavating unit is a pipe and cable locator? Yes, I think it would.

I’m on the mailing list for a sewer magazine that always has full-page ads for vacuum trucks. Do all of these manufacturers think of their equipment as pipe and cable locators? I wonder. Fact is, though, that some manufacturers of vacuum excavating equipment think of their equipment as pipe and cable locators. They are verse with damage prevention issues and have customers that offer damage prevention services. These manufacturers are the ones we want to engage in our magazine’s effort to improve damage prevention. But, first, I think *Underground Focus* should challenge our readers to think about the words we use in damage prevention.

Why did the SUE industry go with the distinction between designating and locating? I’ve got to think that a bit of it had to do with addressing the perception that locating underground utilities was something you could get done for free. After all, the one-call industry did such a nice job of promoting the “free” part. So, the use of designating may just be an example of good marketing. Locating is free, but you have to pay for designating.

But I think it’s much more likely that the distinction between designating and locating rests with the pedigree of information. What degree of proof do you need? I think I know or I know for sure? I can designate where it is or I can locate it. I can feel good about where the pipe or cable is or, on the other hand, I can see the pipe or cable. There’s your difference. And if the customer clearly understands the difference between designating and locating, then that’s good marketing.

So, sticking with SUE terms, here’s my take

on one-call: utilities designate and excavators locate. State damage prevention laws dictate that the excavator must locate buried pipes and cables when digging takes place within certain distances of these pipes and cables. But if the excavator’s work takes place beyond a certain distance from designated utilities, excavators are not required to locate. Damages occur when buried utilities are mis-designated or not designated at all. Damages also occur when buried utilities are not located. But damages seldom result when buried utilities are located. So what do we need to do to reduce damages? Simply put, we need more locating.

OK, I used to think that the term designating was a bit smug. In a way, I still do. But you know what? It was brilliant to call hand-digging and potholing “locating.” So with locating already in use, you have to come up with a new name for “old” locating. I doubt I could have come up with a better term than designating. But do we really have to have separate terms between SUE and damage prevention? Isn’t using a pipe or cable locating instrument exactly the same no matter what you call it? You bet it is.

You know what? Sometimes a simple change of terms is the stimulus for an explosive change in results. When utilities are located (the SUE term), there are virtually no damages. We want to reduce damages. How do we do we reduce damages? How about changing a few words and a definition, or two?

“Locating is a shared responsibility.” Sound familiar? I like this better than the old one. There aren’t too many ways you can locate. One is to hand-dig. The other is to use a locator, a vacuum excavator. Used properly, vacuum excavation is the safest way to locate buried utilities. Designating is part of locating; it’s just the pre-locate part of locating. So, facility owners and excavators both participate in locating, don’t they? If either facility owners or excavators really want to reduce damages they will do more locating.

Underground Focus is committed to finding ways to improve damage prevention. The words we use in our publication may be one of our ways of making that happen. And the way we think about locating may influence the ways other think about locating. “Better living through locating?” It’s possible. **UF**



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