

Communications: It Pays To Share

By Stephen V. Smith

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(NOTE: In the coming weeks, WordSouth will facilitate a meeting for utility communicators at the TMEPA offices in Brentwood. We will dive deeper into the concepts outlined in the article below, exploring ideas on how collaborating with other utilities can improve your communications efforts. Please help us prepare by asking your utility's communicator to [complete the quick survey found here](#). Thank you!)

The members of TMEPA are, by nature, a sharing bunch. Through your state organization, you share information through your conferences. You share ideas through this newsletter. You share lobbying efforts and a most excellent TMEPA staff. During times of disaster-related power outages, you even share crews and other resources to help your fellow systems restore power.

But what about communications? With the similarities between member systems, there is much to be gained from sharing resources in this area as well.

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Water heaters. Heat pumps. New homes programs. Energy efficiency. Scam alerts. Statewide legislative issues. Many topics relate to all TMEPA members. Chances are, a good idea that works in one part of Tennessee is going to work in any other region of the state. You have an obligation to educate and inform your customers, but that doesn't mean you have to create every communications piece from scratch.

Expand Your Staff

Except for the very large cities, most municipal systems do not have the resources to support a full communications staff. These duties often fall to one person — and sometimes that person has other duties besides communications. When a small staff is juggling community relations, public affairs, marketing your programs and who knows what else, they are often stretched too thin to do everything to the level they would prefer. By sharing resources, you can effectively expand your staff by leveraging the combined efforts of several utilities working toward the same goals.

Deliver a Consistent Message

Another advantage of sharing communications efforts is that it helps you present a consistent message throughout the state. Speaking with a unified voice fosters familiarity with your message across the region, which is important when people relocate to other Tennessee cities or communicate with friends and family who live elsewhere. Consistent messaging with your customers also grows supporters for advocacy issues, helping TMEPA members engage citizens in legislative efforts.

Keep On Keeping On

When resources are limited, communicating can become a tiring affair. The work is simply never done. There is no such thing as “having communicated.” New customers come and go. Customers move into and out of your service area. People forget things you tell them. You can't just tell them once; you have to keep on telling them — long after you're tired of hearing yourself talk. By sharing resources, you can ease the burden on your staff of communicating “for the long haul.”

Reach Out

The question you may have now is “sharing sounds great, but how do we facilitate that?” There are several approaches to take. Reach out to your fellow TMEPA members and gauge interest in a sharing program among your communications teams. Set up some regional meetings to discuss areas of commonality and how sharing could help you communicate these. Identify first steps you could take to gain some quick victories that you can build upon as your sharing efforts grow.

Be intentional. Bring the same level of commitment to communications as you do to other areas in which you share resources with your fellow systems. These efforts will benefit all utilities involved — and everyone involved will end up with customers who are better educated, informed and engaged regarding the services you provide and your mission in the communities you serve.

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