“You can see not only how much energy you are using but also how much it costs. That is a big incentive to use less. We are continuing to develop better habits on energy consumption.”
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Objective

Energy utilities in the U.S. are making significant strides in educating and engaging their customers about how to better control how much energy they use, the resulting costs they incur and the benefits of shifting their consumption. New installations and activations of Smart Meters combined with the deployment of Smart Grid infrastructure herald a new era of energy management by utilities and consumers alike.

While no two utilities are moving forward at the same pace, by 2012 many utilities had widely deployed Smart Meters, making an objective assessment of common success factors possible. Over 35 million Smart Meters are installed, making substantial progress toward the estimated 65 million Smart Meters that are to be installed and fully deployed by year-end 2015, equal to about half of all U.S. households.¹

This report by the Smart Grid Consumer Collaborative (SGCC) spotlights how Smart Meter / Smart Grid deployments by four utilities have engaged consumers to enable them to match the energy they use with their needs and lifestyles. In every case, the engagement strategies and tactics employed by the utilities have led to behavioral change as customers have actually reduced their electricity bills. Along the way, the utilities spotlighted are improving their ability to balance how they meet peak demands for power without relying solely on building or acquiring new generating assets. Scaling up these experiences harbors huge benefits not just for consumers and the industries that serve them, but also for the environment and energy policy.

The four utilities are:

- CenterPoint Energy
- Oklahoma Gas & Electric
- San Diego Gas & Electric
- Southern California Edison

### Selection Criteria for “Smart Grid Success Stories”
were as follows:

1. Significant deployment of Smart Meters and the underlying Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI).
2. Strategic engagement through education programs that enable and motivate consumers to use the available Smart Grid technology and/or program.
3. Evidence of consumer engagement as determined in part by authentic customer testimonials available articulating the benefits of Smart Grid in their own voices.
4. Utilities willing to share the lessons they’re learning.
Executive Summary

Looking across the dynamic ecosystem of Smart Grid, the SGCC finds that positive experience with Smart Grid is growing. As consumers become aware of Smart Grid/Smart Meters and their knowledge and favorability grow, utilities have started introducing new technology, devices and applications to empower consumers, help them take action, and control their usage. This report spotlights the strategies and tactics employed by four energy utilities in the U.S. to successfully engage customers with the benefits of the Smart Grid, Smart Meters, demand response, and enabling technology and devices for home energy management. As Smart Grid becomes more pervasive across the U.S., this SGCC report highlights a set of successful engagement principles to serve as a resource for all industry stakeholders looking to hasten consumer awareness, acceptance and adoption of Smart Grid technologies and programs.

This list is not meant to be a definitive tally of successful consumer engagement by utilities. There are other utilities in the U.S., including those owned by governments, that have demonstrated considerable progress in engaging their customers about what Smart Grid investments mean to them. This first report, and future editions, are guided by the SGCC's consumer-centric criteria and its mission to foster development of a consumer safe and friendly Smart Grid.

The purpose of this report is to define a set of successful engagement principles that all industry stakeholders can easily draw from to hasten the deployment of Smart Grid policies, technologies, equipment and programs that will benefit consumers and society alike. Examples of how each of these four utilities produced measureable gains in customer satisfaction, Smart Grid program adoption, and behavioral change are detailed in their individual narratives.

While performance metrics are referenced on occasion in this report, the findings in this report are qualitative in nature and do not reflect a quantitative analysis.

Seven Core Ingredients of Successful Smart Grid Engagements

1. Educate Customers Before Deployment
2. Anticipate and Answer Questions Before Customers Ask Them
3. Facilitate Community Engagement
4. Communicate Ways to Shift Usage Off-Peak
5. Deploy User-Friendly Web Portal
6. Offer User-Friendly Smart Grid Enabled Technology Such as Thermostats
7. Create Authentic Customer Testimonials
Educate Customers Before Deployment

Put yourself in the consumer’s mindset: greeted — some might say confronted — with a brand new way of thinking about home energy management, now customers can start to proactively manage the electricity they use. This change in how customers relate to energy requires a commensurately thorough and enlightened approach to boost customer awareness of Smart Meters and the benefits they offer. Below are two examples of consumer-centric communication strategies and well-executed tactics that led to successful Smart Meter deployments and customer education.

SDG&E’s 90-60-30-day Implementation Protocol

Along with general media outreach, San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) built awareness about planned Smart Meter installations at each of three 30-day intervals leading up to installation. “We tested every step in this process with the customer and the end result in mind,” said Farrell Cox, SDG&E’s Smart Meter Deployment Manager.

90 DAYS AHEAD: Stakeholder Education Group members connected with community leaders wherever possible in face-to-face meetings.

60 DAYS AHEAD: Group members organized and spoke to community gatherings about how Smart Meters could help them better understand the cost of the energy they use.

30 DAYS AHEAD: Customers received a letter with a timeframe they could expect a Smart Meter to be installed at their residence.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE, two outbound dialing teams — one at SDG&E, the other at contractor Grid One — notified customers of the ‘window’ during which the installer would be on site. Customers had the option of specifying their own ‘window.’ This way, they could be sure, for example, their computers were backed up and turned off and any life-support systems could continue to run smoothly.

SDG&E’s strategy paid off. Out of 2.3 million meter installations, they received complaints from only about 1,200, or 0.16%, of them.

CenterPoint Energy’s Strategy from Day One

A key component of CenterPoint Energy’s Smart Meter deployment strategy included staging communications ahead of key customer touch points. CenterPoint Energy notified consumers in their territory of Smart Meter deployment using door hangers, small billboards, radio in retail stores and cinema advertisements. They also enabled consumers to track deployment progress in their neighborhoods online. Increasingly, they found that Smart Meter awareness grew along with consumers’ keen interest in better managing their costs of air conditioning through Texas’ often brutal hot summer days and nights. From their 2011 survey of electricity consumer in the Houston area, CenterPoint Energy found that 80% approved of the company’s Smart Grid; only 6% disapproved.
Anticipate and Answer Questions Before Customers Ask Them

Preparation may be three-fourths of the challenge of engaging utility customers. To manage expectations and address customer concerns before they have the opportunity to snowball, utilities need to think like consumers and anticipate the questions they are likely to ask before, during, and after Smart Grid/Smart Meter deployment.

Training Employees to be Ambassadors

Utilities can leverage their employees’ relationships and status in their communities by using internal education programs to encourage them to act as program representatives and engage in personal, informal interactions with customers. Internal messaging and education programs also ensure that all employees provide a consistent and positive external message across all customer touch points.

- CenterPoint Energy tapped its Houston-area workforce of 2,175 employees to communicate Smart Meter essentials with a Smart Meter training program. Approximately 1,500 of those employees were trained using a separate intelligent grid training module. Those who passed an online course for each became “ambassadors” for the company’s “energyInSight” campaign. The company’s ambassadors fanned out to speak to a variety of civic, religious, and business groups demonstrating along the way how serious they are in making the Smart Grid work for all of the consumers in their service territory.

- To ensure they were plugged into customers’ adoption of Smart Meters and what it could do for them, SDG&E deployed an “Infield Liaison Team” comprised of three recent retirees to canvass about 50,000 customers in a representative sample of neighborhoods about two weeks after the installation.

Share The Details: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ’s)

When questions or complaints cannot be addressed by front-line personnel, a platform to elevate the utility’s response can help prevent customer issues from veering out of control. FAQs (frequently asked questions) represent one of the most important web pages in an organization’s website. Nowhere else do customers so deliberately indicate that they want to know the details than by clicking on FAQs. Answers to customers’ most frequently asked questions and concerns can be streamlined using customer-friendly language and images.

Below we spotlight FAQs by CenterPoint Energy and Southern California Edison for their breadth and depth.

CenterPoint Energy

CenterPoint Energy may have left no stone unturned in its efforts to address a variety of questions prompted by the installation of Smart Meters.

What makes “smart” meters smart? CenterPoint Energy outlines how Smart Meters transmit electric usage data via a wireless two-way communication system and how this enables consumers to track energy consumption down to 15-minute intervals. If a customer’s power goes out, CenterPoint Energy drives home how its operations personnel can see that immediately and thus direct crews to begin restoring power more quickly than with analog meters.

I’m concerned about privacy. Will Smart Meters let you see when I watch TV or run my appliances? CenterPoint Energy explains that Smart Meters do not reveal when one watches TV or operates appliances. The usage data delivered by Smart Meters is not categorized by appliance. That said, the company points out that if customers choose, they may be able to connect five electric appliances to an optional Home Area Network (HAN) enabling them to see how each appliance uses electricity.

Exactly how much money will I save with the new Smart Meters? After explaining how savings can depend on one’s usage, CenterPoint Energy offers consumers examples on YouTube about In-Home Displays and how they can get the most out of Smart Meters.

Who else can see my usage? Are you going to share my information with marketers? CenterPoint Energy spells out how under Texas law, energy usage data belongs to the consumer and can be shared only when authorized in writing by the consumer or authorized by regulatory authorities as necessary to conduct business, such as for billing.

For the full SGCC Smart Grid Customer Engagement Success Stories report including all seven core ingredients of successful Smart Grid engagements and four utility case studies, please visit SGCC’s website and download the report.