

AMERICAN GAS

**INDUSTRY UPDATE:
CROSS BORE
PREVENTION 24**

**WANT A LOW-COST,
HIGH-IMPACT
COMMUNICATIONS
TACTIC? 30**

IT'S PERSONAL
EMPLOYEES AT NATURAL GAS
UTILITIES TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE
IN GIVING BACK TO THEIR
COMMUNITIES

Want a low-cost, high-impact communications tactic? Try mobilizing your utility's retirees as volunteer ambassadors. **BY JOHN EGAN**

YOUR UTILITY'S NEW FEET ON THE STREET

Construction is scheduled to begin for billions of dollars of natural gas pipeline and local distribution company projects across North America this year, including

both grass-roots projects and infrastructure expansions. For example, New England desperately needs to add more inbound gas pipeline and LDC capacity to keep the lights on. Other areas, like the Marcellus Shale, are building outbound pipelines and infrastructure to bring more gas to market faster.

As we know, virtually all of those projects face potential for delay or disruption from opponents. Utilities and pipeline developers—and their consultants—have used a variety of means, ranging from open houses to paid advertising to direct mail, to inform and persuade stakeholders about the strategic need for specific projects.

But few have tried this low-cost, high-impact communications tactic: mobilizing

a utility's retirees to conduct door-to-door outreach.

Save the cracks about encyclopedia salespeople, Avon ladies and the Fuller Brush man. Perhaps you hadn't heard: All that's old is new again, and the effectiveness of some traditional channels has fallen significantly. Newspaper readership continues to decline, making print ads less effective. The national no-call list has deprived utilities of outbound telemarketing. Rare is the utility with email or cell phone contact data for more than about 25 percent of its customers. The newsletter remains an effective tactic, but typically only for certain demographics.

That leaves face-to-face outreach from utility retirees as a communications tool worth exploring. These days, selling door to door is how the Girl Scouts move billions of dollars of cookies each year. Face-to-face outreach generates hundreds of millions of dollars for presidential candidates. If your utility has a good reputation, why not leverage that through face-to-face encounters with customers?

On any given energy issue, like most things in life, stakeholders are distributed along the classic bell-shaped curve: Small but similar percentages stand on opposite sides of the curve, either strongly opposing or supporting a given measure. But the large majority—perhaps up to 80 percent—are

undecided. They can be convinced. All it takes is a good message and a credible messenger. Properly mobilized and staffed, a utility's retirees could mean the difference between a project that moves forward with minimal opposition or one that is delayed or cancelled.

In researching how utilities could mobilize their retirees, I had numerous interviews with utility community relations managers. Very few said they had any ongoing interaction with their retirees beyond an annual thank-you event like a spring picnic or holiday dinner. Virtually no official I interviewed said they had asked their retirees to do anything on the company's behalf.

Yet during my research, I was told by some retirees that they would like to be asked to do something on behalf of the utility. The head of one utility alumni association told me, "Management used to ask us to get involved, but it's been a long time since the phone rang. It's almost like we're out of sight, out of mind."

But my interview with Louisville Gas and Electric Co. and its sibling utility, Kentucky Utilities Co., went very differently. Those utilities, now a unit of PPL Corp., have mobilized their retirees and have been making wise use of them as volunteers for a variety of outreach activities for over 20 years. The retirees' work complements the work of paid staffers in community relations, communications and marketing.

The retirees have broken down barriers, put a face and name on the utility, educated customers and occasionally have been



enlisted to advocate on issues that affect the utility and its customers, including:

- Explained changes in retiree benefits to other retirees.
- Discussed with their neighbors the utility's stance on important issues like price increases, infrastructure investments, environmental projects and hydro relicensing.
- Participated in classroom instruction on history, safety and careers in the utility industry.
- Staffed volunteer events around the Kentucky Derby, Kentucky State Fair and the Marine Corp.'s Toys for Tots drive.

"When we put out a call for 10 to 20 volunteers, we usually get 50," said Sandy Gentry, a supervisor in LG&E's office of special projects. "Our retirees are a valuable institutional memory—why shouldn't we use them? Retirees have the ability to talk to their neighbors on a 'guy next door' level, without sounding corporate. We are consciously using them to expand our reach into the community."

Here are some other ways mobilized retirees could be deployed by an LDC:

- Discuss environmental regulations.
- Enlist neighbors in advocacy efforts, the way the industry did with the "Defend My Dividend" campaign a few years back.
- Promote customer programs like paperless bill payment and energy efficiency.

- Educate customers about advanced digital meters.
- Raise the utility's community profile by staffing booths at community events, art fairs, health fairs and wine or craft beer festivals.
- Support a utility's efforts to get customers' full digital contact information (cell number and email address).

Think of what your utility could accomplish if it added 50 or 100 or 200 extra sets of feet on the street, bringing your message and delivering your campaigns to your customers on a personal, face-to-face basis. Depending on the size of your utility, you may have hundreds, if not thousands, of retirees in a given area. And chances are those retirees will want to stay connected with their former colleagues and former employer.

I'll give Sandy at LG&E the last words here, because she was so eloquent and passionate about her utility's retiree involvement: "Our retirees have an emotional connection to the people and the utility where they spent their working years. They want to keep that alive. Without a doubt, retirees are one of our most important communications and community relations assets."

John Egan is president of Egan Energy Communications, a national communications firm that works with utilities to turn stakeholders into allies and advocates.



NEXT ISSUE

CUSTOMER SERVICE

As the American Gas Association and the Edison Electric Institute partner with CS Week for the first time, we highlight a key industry issue that will be featured at the conference: customer engagement. Consolidated Edison, Alliant Energy and Pepco Holdings/Delmarva Power are just a few companies with programs focusing on this issue.

CLEAN POWER PLAN: IMPACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

How will the Clean Power Plan impact you? And where will local distribution companies find new opportunities? The American Gas Association's Richard Meyer shares the latest findings.

BURNER TIPS: CYBERSECURITY

Despite the best tools and technology, the human factor can wreak havoc on your company when it comes to cybersecurity. DNG-ISAC Threat Analyst John Bryk offers his insights on how to best prevent unintentional insider threats.

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Interested in learning more about Egan Energy Communications?

Egan Energy Communications (EEC) is a national communications firm specializing in the electricity and energy industries. Founded in 2009, EEC is powered by John Egan's utility-industry experience and knowledge. He provides utilities with cost-effective writing services based on minimal ramp-up time, a broad national network and deep industry expertise.

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- Website copy refreshes
- White Papers
- Thought leadership articles
- Employee communications

■ Here's what your industry peers are saying about EEC:

"John's industry expertise and writing talent gave one of our top-tier global consulting clients confidence that he could interpret complex industry issues for their intended audience – and he absolutely did. From our perspective, John's work has enhanced our standing with that global client. Nice job, Egan Energy Communications -- well done."

-- John Kerr, Ergo Editorial, President

"As a client of EEC I have benefited greatly from reading EEC Perspectives. It is a nice break from the many other newsletters that provide little value. John Egan understands communications and understands utilities, so I enjoy the relevance of his articles and also lighthearted way in which they are delivered."

-- Barry Henck, Central Hudson Gas & Electric

"It can be difficult to find an external resource that owns your deadlines as much as you. John does that. I appreciate his commitment to mapping out a project plan and sticking to it. He's a solid driving force—and I mean that in a good way!"

-- Stephanie Hoff, Otter Tail Power



Contact us today at 720-949-4906 or John@EgenEnergy.com to learn how EEC can be a cost-effective supplement to your communications and marketing team.