



“There’s a Green Box on my Lawn. What Does It Do?”

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I wouldn’t be the first person to say that the American public, by and large, is scientifically illiterate. It’s not a nice thing to say, but it is true. And it’s a charge to which I am the first to plead guilty.

So, for a complicated and technical industry like ours, how can we communicate effectively with the vast majority of customers who are neither electrical engineers nor environmental scientists?

If our goal is to write copy that is understandable to the average eighth-grade student, as major news organizations recommend, how do we do that?

We could start small. Maybe our audience isn’t terribly interested in the vicissitudes of the Clean Power Plan. But they may be interested in a piece of utility equipment they may see every day, or a utility construction project in their neighborhood.



Credit: Owatonna Public Utilities

That's the idea behind some work I am doing for Owatonna Public Utilities, which earlier this year launched a "Utility Equipment" series in their monthly [customer newsletter](#).

"We wanted to make a better connection with our customers by discussing some of the equipment they see every day, and some they may not know exists at all," said Jennie Heimerman, supervisor of customer care for Owatonna Public Utilities (OPU), a public utility that provides electric, gas and water service to about 11,000 customers in Minnesota.

"Each month we feature a brief write-up about common pieces of our equipment that customers are likely to see," she said.

So far, I've written pieces on OPU's [electric meters](#), [poles and wires](#), a [transformer substation](#) undergoing construction and [distribution transformers](#).

OPU's utility equipment series is part of efforts by utility communicators across the country to communicate more effectively with customers using easily understood words or images.

A while back I [proposed](#) five programs utilities could use to make electricity and natural gas more real to their customers. That blog focused only on programs.

For the sake of argument, in that post I ruled out discussing electric or gas service in terms of price, since kilowatt-hours of electricity or therms of gas mean nothing to most people. I also didn't include non-text-based ways to convey information, such as videos,

photos or infographics. That's not to say pictures aren't replacing words. They are. But my goal in that blog post was to keep things simple.

It's not an easy task: how can you discuss a vital service that can't be seen, touched, tasted or otherwise experienced — except when the lights go out or there's a gas explosion — without referencing its price?

When I proposed these five programs to attendees at a conference, I asked how many were implementing one or more of those programs. Many said they were doing none of them. Some said they were doing one, a very few said they were doing two.

There are numerous ways utilities can make energy real to their customers. My list of programs was a starting point, not an all-inclusive list. When you combine program ideas with communications techniques like social media, infographics or video as well as [face-to-face interaction](#), you can see there are numerous ways to make energy real.

The other day I ran across this [infographic](#) from Entergy about a new power plant it plans to build. Entergy said it would use about 195 miles of wire and cable in the new power plant. But Entergy also rendered that information a different, more customer-intuitive way: it would be enough wire and cable to encircle LSU's football stadium 340 times. For football-crazy residents of Baton Rouge, home of the LSU Tigers, that got the message across loud and clear.

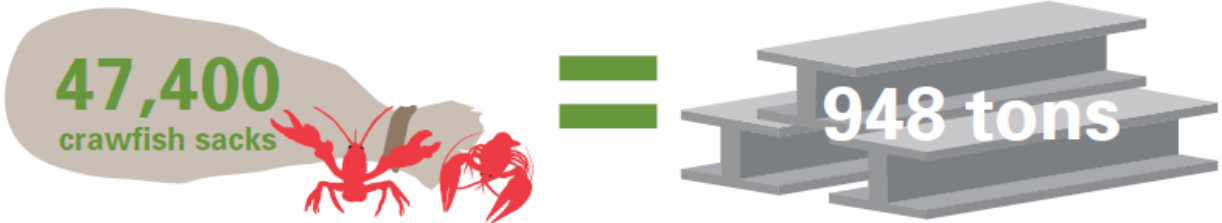
Putting it all in Perspective

Constructing Entergy Louisiana's 980-megawatt combined-cycle plant will involve vast amounts of material.



Enough wire and cable to circle LSU's Tiger Stadium approximately 340 times.
If the 1,029,826 feet of wire and cable were rolled out, it would extend 195 miles.

The 948 tons of structural steel equals the weight of 47,400 40-pound sacks of crawfish or 57 Entergy 60-foot bucket trucks.



23,281 cubic yards of concrete is enough to pour foundations for 87 single-story, four-bedroom, two-bath houses.



The conduit, cable trays and duct banks laid end to end would run nearly the full length of the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway.



Credit: Entergy

Kudos also to the American Public Power Association (APPA), which developed the [infographic](#) below showing, by region, the leading causes of power outages.

TOP CAUSES OF POWER OUTAGES



Credit: APPA

These are all positive signs that utility communicators and marketers are trying harder and experimenting with different ways to connect with customers. That's all to the good. Rather than asking customers to learn our language, why not try harder to speak with them in theirs?

If you have something you want to share on this, please send it to [me](#). I would like to do a practitioner's round-up in a future blog.

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