

CASE STUDY: Benton REA



Best-Practice Research on Communications Channels

The Benton Rural Electric Association is a not-for-profit electric cooperative, owned by those they serve. Founded in 1937 and energized in 1938, Benton REA currently serves 10,000 members.

The Mission at Benton Rural Electric Association is to provide affordable, and reliable energy and other member driven compatible services that enhance the quality of life for all of their members.

Executive Summary

Troy Berglund needed help and he needed it fast. His boss, the general manager at Benton Rural Electric Association, was asking hard questions about how the electric cooperative was spending its communications budget and what it got for what it spent.

“My boss was asking me questions like, ‘I know what we’re spending — what are we getting?’ and ‘How do we know?’ ” Troy recalled.

“Every communicator gets asked those questions,” continued Troy, Benton REA’s manager of community development and member relations. “They’re the right questions to ask. But I didn’t have the staff, expertise or time to properly answer them.”



Challenge

The communications challenge facing Benton REA sprang from changes in the demographics of its service area which had become split between longtime co-op members and new arrivals. Many of the new arrivals worked in high-tech businesses. The longtime members knew Benton REA, attended its annual member's meeting and had a long history of positive interactions with the co-op. The new arrivals had none of those things.

The different communities shopped at different venues and spent their leisure time in disparate activities. They preferred to receive communications in different ways: longtime members liked reading the monthly magazine while newer arrivals favored digital and face-to-face communications.

Troy (right) turned to [Egan Energy Communications \(EEC\)](#) to conduct best-practices research into communications effectiveness. Together they developed a plan to review the available research on electric cooperative communications excellence, create and administer a

detailed qualitative phone survey of a select number of Benton REA's peer co-operatives and distill the findings into a set of recommendations for Benton REA, which serves about 10,000 members in south-central Washington State.

John developed a survey instrument and spent about a week on the phones, interviewing other co-op communicators. He reviewed case studies on best practices in communications from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Administration (NRECA). Then he traveled to Prosser, Washington, to interview the principals at Benton REA and understand how business got done locally.



Solution

Asking peer co-ops about their most impactful communications channels uncovered some new ideas and validated existing ones. A time-honored approach to operational improvements, conducting best-practices research gave Benton REA a broader prism through which it could view its communications and outreach activities.

Among the research uncovered was the following:

- One peer co-op in Missouri found its best communications channel was its monthly magazine; its next-most impactful channel was social media.
- Another cooperative, based in Pennsylvania, said digital cinema ads were its most powerful means of communicating with members, followed by items it placed on its weather camera.
- A third co-op, located in Kansas, said community events were the best way to reach members. After that, earned media (i.e., news stories) worked best.

Conclusion

Troy wants Benton REA to communicate with members using the channels they prefer. Some of the options recommended by John were put into place immediately while others were more longer-term solutions.

"Working with John was refreshing," Troy said. "I particularly liked the way he didn't approach this project with a set of pre-packaged ideas. He listened to us, took time to understand our needs and came back with some very helpful recommendations. If you want to get more bang for your communications buck," he concluded, "contact John and he'll help you figure it out."

