



COVID-19: Three Non-Traditional Ways to Help Your Customers and Communities©

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Credit: American Public Power Assn.

I have often blogged that “communications” is about deeds as much as words. The non-verbal communications you exhibit when interacting with others, or the actions done by energy companies and their employees, are as important, if not more so, than the words that are spoken or written. It all rolls up to communications.

The COVID-19 pandemic gives energy companies and their employees an opportunity to show with their deeds what they value at a time when anxiety and fear are gripping your customers, the country and the economy.

What Energy Companies are Doing

There have been numerous reports of energy companies that have taken steps to financially support customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These steps include foregoing disconnections, reconnecting customers at no charge, creating deferred payment plans and suspending late fees.

A March 13 [article](#) in *Public Power Daily* detailed the diverse actions taken by locally owned utilities like the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD), CPS Energy, Austin Energy, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (LADWP), Seattle City Light, Lincoln Electric System, JEA, Gainesville Regional Utilities and others.

As reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, shareholder-owned energy companies like Duke Energy, Puget Sound Energy, Public Service Electric & Gas, and Pacific Gas & Electric have undertaken several steps to financially support customers during the COVID-19 crisis.

All of this is terrific, and I am sure the number of energy companies and range of actions will continue to grow. COVID-19 is expected to have a widespread financial impact on residential and commercial customers. People and businesses will remember who was there for them when they needed help.

What Else Can Energy Companies Do?

The COVID-19 pandemic creates non-traditional and more personalized, opportunities for energy-company employees to help their communities, their customers and their members. All that's required is a little out-of-the-box thinking that your community's connects needs and your internal resources.

Getting Food Back on the Shelves



Credit: Tony Lee Glenn

You know these folks, or you know some folks like them. Linemen often are the face, and sometimes the voice, of electric organizations. That's largely because what they do is visual, and good visuals can be used to tell a good story.

I have interviewed numerous linemen at different utilities, and I have always been struck by their deep commitment to serving customers and communities. What they do is hard and dangerous, and all of us are better off because linemen live and work in our communities.

As you know and have probably experienced, shortly after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, shoppers made a break for their grocery stores. As in past emergencies, bread, milk and bottled water flew off the shelves. But unlike past crises, boxed pasta, canned soup and hand sanitizer also disappeared overnight. Empty shelves like this greeted shoppers from coast to coast.



Credit: iStock

Companies in the food supply chain insisted there was no shortage of food. It was instead a logistical challenge of getting it from distribution centers to individual stores, and then having the staff there to unload trucks and restock shelves.

Linemen used to hard physical labor could be a critical link in restocking shelves.

Grocery stores, like a lot of retailers, have thin margins and a difficult time getting, and keeping, employees. Of course, grocery store employees should be offered the opportunity to increase their hours, and given that so many schools have been temporarily shut down, they may be able to fill the need. But if not, and if all grocery stores need is a dozen additional sets of arms and legs to unload trucks or restock shelves, enlisting your company's linemen on a volunteer basis would get those shelves restocked in a hurry.

Getting Food to the Homebound



Credit: iStock

COVID-19 is a fast-moving global health crisis that has spawned other crises. One of them is the need to get food to homebound people. Foodbanks have called for additional donations, but organizations like local [Meals on Wheels](#) have put out the call for more drivers who can bring food to recipients. If your company doesn't already have a Meals on Wheels employee volunteer group, now could be the time to start one!

Pivot to Teletutoring

Many schools are closed, but students still need academic support. This is a huge volunteer opportunity for energy company employees. Many local libraries have "tutor time" hours where students can get a little extra help, but now that many libraries also are closed, this could be a good time to step forward and try to help students master reading, math, and writing via teleconferencing.



Credit: iStock

What Does Your Community Need?

Energy company employees are civic minded and deeply concerned about their communities. These are three non-traditional ways that came to mind for addressing a community's needs using energy company resources in ways that would not expose volunteers to undue risks.

Some energy companies have an employee volunteerism panel. Hopefully they would be willing to consider some of these non-traditional ways to match community needs with employee resources.

Organizations that deliver electricity, natural gas and water to a designated geographic area by definition have a vested interest in enhancing the quality of life in that area. With this COVID-19 crisis putting a lot of people out of their comfort zones, rising to the occasion with creative employee volunteerism will not only help your community heal faster, it will respond to employees' deep-seated search for meaning.