



ADVOCATE CONTINUALLY USING WORDS AND DEEDS

by John Egan

“The best time to make friends,” actress Ethel Barrymore once observed, “is before you need them.”

Barrymore’s quip from the prior century has particular relevance today for FMEA members: As the energy industry moves toward a lower-carbon future, and as electricity prices rise, it’s more important than ever that your customer-owners understand that you are locally owned, and why that’s a distinction with a difference.

Sometimes having friends can help a locally owned utility survive a life-or-death moment, such as attempts by outside parties to privatize it. On a more everyday level, it’s always nice to have members of the community publicly advocate for a utility during power outages, price increases or other operational challenges.

In the utility business, the best way to make friends is to provide superior service, charge a fair price, communicate frequently with your customers, employees and other stakeholders, and always be transparent.

Florida publicly owned utilities Lakeland Electric and JEA in Jacksonville recently survived privatization efforts because their public power communities stood up for them and defeated profit-driven attempts to privatize their local utilities.

“The more informed and engaged our customers are, the more likely they will become advocates for us,” said Cathryn Lacy, utilities marketing manager for Lakeland Electric, which serves about 135,000 customers.

That advocacy became critical in 2019 when a ballot initiative that would have made it easier to privatize the utility was voted down 65 percent to 35 percent. “That showed the value of community support in a big way,” she said.

First Things First: Provide Excellent Service

Building a utility’s reputation and performance level over the long term is a collection of actions that happen every day. For utilities, that has to start with excellent service, specifically around providing highly reliable electric service and fast power restoration after a storm or other events.

Poor reliability by an investor-owned utility helped create the conditions for the City of Winter Park to municipalize in 2005. Dan D’Alessandro, director of the electric utility, had a front-row seat for that battle, though he was seated in another part of the arena.

D’Alessandro, at the time an employee of Progress Energy, recalled the incumbent investor-owned utility (IOU) provided its Winter Park customers with low reliability and poor customer service. When Progress Energy’s franchise came up for renewal, the IOU’s leaders expected it would be approved, as it had been several times before. When the first signs of resistance arose, he said, “employees started going door-to-door to scare people” about what a municipal electric utility could mean to them.

The scare campaign failed because, in one retelling, Winter Park residents simply got tired of having to reset the clocks on their

VCRs after yet another Progress Energy power outage.

Although Winter Park’s retail electric prices are far less than neighboring Duke Energy’s, and the statewide average, D’Alessandro said price comparisons are easy to make. “Where we really hang our hat is on reliability and customer service.” Shortly before the city municipalized, its customers experienced an average of three hours of power outages per year. Now, that number is down to 41 minutes, and he’s working to push it lower.

Sometimes service shows itself in the little things. Winter Park lineworkers unfurl flags at restaurants and community events. The utility’s website shares D’Alessandro’s name and contact information. He doesn’t play hide-and-seek with those who pay his salary. And when he gets customer calls, he jumps into action.

The Winter Park leader recalled he took a call at home on a Sunday from a customer who said power was out in parts of his home. Knowing that meant there was a bad neutral at the customer site, he called the on-call troubleman and asked him to assist the customer.

In a similar vein, downtown Park Avenue is restaurant row in Winter Park, and all the restaurants on that street have his home and cell numbers and email address in case they need to alert him to power outages or service problems. It’s part of what he called “providing concierge service, a level of service you’d never get from an IOU.”



D'Alessandro began his utility career as a lineworker at Progress Energy. Many times, he said he worked through the night to restore a power outage, only to come to work the next day and hear that customers had complained about long restoration times.

"Communications is critical," he said. "I believe we would have gotten far fewer complaints if we provided customers with more timely updates so they could make decisions. Should I pack up the family and go to a hotel? Should I order a bunch of pizzas? Or should I wait 30 minutes until the power comes back on?"

"Most customers will be patient and understanding if you communicate with them," he said.

Make Sure Your Customers Know They Are Owners

In 2015, when Lakeland Electric established a marketing department separate from the city's, one of the first things it learned was that a significant portion of its customers thought the utility was privately owned by investors.

"That really stood out for us," recalled Lacy, the utilities marketing manager. "Before we tried to do anything else, we

needed to inform our customers that we were locally owned, locally controlled and locally operated. We went to a lot of homeowner's association meetings, Rotary Club meetings, Kiwanis Club meetings to strategically inform customers that we were owned by them.

"If customers don't understand that you are locally owned and responsive to them, they won't appreciate the other things we do."

Lakeland Electric reoriented its marketing materials to highlight local businesses, energy efficiency rebates and employees.

Another way the Winter Park Electric Utility delivers on its pledge to provide concierge-level services is their current undergrounding project.

The utility polled residents about undergrounding service lines to the home as a way to increase electric reliability and resilience, particularly during the hurricane season. About 50 percent said they were interested. Most of those who were less interested cited the expected cost of burying electric lines into the home.

So the utility, acting on a suggestion from its Utility Advisory Board, offered to underground the lines at no cost. It is using its net revenue to pay the estimated \$7 million annual cost.

"Given the circumstances that led to the creation of a municipal utility, reliability and resilience are special issues for our customers," Dan D'Alessandro said. "We offer lower prices, better reliability, and we're undergrounding lines to customers' homes at no cost. What's the likelihood you're going to get that from an IOU?"

The overriding message, she said, was that “at the end of the day, we’re your neighbors.”

Showing the public power flag once a year, during Public Power Week recognized annually each October, is not enough, she emphasized. “We need to talk about the benefits of public power continuously.”

Once their customers understood Lakeland Electric was locally owned, Lacy said, “things kind of made more sense to them.” Now, more than 50 percent of the utility’s customers know Lakeland Electric is owned by the community.

When those numbers shifted in the utility’s direction, she continued, other messages about community involvement and energy efficiency naturally got greater traction.

The “acid test” of local ownership, she continued, was what came to be known in 2019 as the “115 Campaign,” when a ballot initiative came up that would, if passed, have made it easier to sell the utility to an outside party. That came as the utility was celebrating its 115th year of service, so the utility decided to respond to the ballot initiative by emphasizing its long history of local ownership and local control.

Using local artist designs on T-shirts, highlighting successful relationships with local businesses and using the “Locally Owned By Me” slogan to help customers feel like stakeholders were their big wins from this campaign, she said.

“I don’t think we would have succeeded in that campaign if we had not worked to inform our customers that they owned the utility,” she said. “Once people learn how public power supports the community, they tend to become big supporters.”

In terms of advocacy, Lacy advised other Florida public power utilities to “consider every conversation and every interaction



as another opportunity to creating a utility advocate.”

Lacy said opposition to the ballot initiative came spontaneously from the community with no named group to organize it.

“We work hard to connect with our community on macro and micro scales,” she said. “We are telling our story through news media, advertisements, and owned media like our website and social media platforms. We are speaking at neighborhood meetings, visiting students in the classroom, attending community events and supporting sports, arts and culture organizations. We support students in S.T.E.A.M. education through scholarships and local nonprofits through grants.

“You can’t build any relationship without listening. For us, this means feet on the ground at community events, collaborating with local nonprofits, conducting surveys and participating in interest-based forums and focus groups. By listening to our customers’ changing needs, concerns and successes, we can be a better partner in our community.”

“I love technology and the amazing ways it is changing how we communicate,” she said, “but word-of-mouth and third-party endorsements are still hugely important. Those personal experiences shared at soccer practice drop-off or in line at the local coffee shop carry tremendous credibility.”

Finding the Most Effective Channels in Your Community

Most Effective

Face-to-Face Interaction with Employees

Customer Word-of-Mouth

Social Media

Video Content

Digital ads

Customer Newsletter

Community Sponsorships

Locally owned utilities are continually experimenting to find the most effective communications channels, with the understanding that a diverse portfolio is necessary to reach all customers.

Ocala Electric Utility (OEU), which provides electric service to about 54,000 customers, is celebrating its 125th year of service in 2023. It has a core value of astonishing, not just satisfying, its customers.

One way it does that is through the philosophy of “C.A.R.E.” — Communities Are the Responsibility of Everyone.

“OEU employees want to be part of Ocala,” Director Doug Peebles said in an interview. “We are our community. We live here. Our kids go to school here. Treating each other, and our customers, with respect is part of how we operate.”

Peebles, a 22-year Ocala Electric Utility employee, became director in January 2022.

“Doug plays a large role in promoting a positive organizational culture,” said Tyler Puckett, the utility’s supervisor for public education, outreach and administration. “We’ve always encouraged employees to volunteer and be active members of the community, but there has been an increase in participation in the last year.”

Delivering on its C.A.R.E. program, OEU participated in 298 community events and presentations in 2021. Ocala Electric Utility prides itself on being Ocala’s “Hometown Public Power Provider.”

The utility also logged 122,300 social media impressions that year. All told, the utility counted a total of 510,374 contacts in 2021. Not bad for a community of about 62,000.

The utility has an expansive view of who should be involved in community outreach. In a word, everyone.

“Outreach is not the sole responsibility of the community relations staff,” Peebles said. “Of course, they lead the charge, but they do it with members of line crews, metering crews, substation, relay, engineering, resource management, finance and beyond. Retirees get involved too at in-house events.

“Everyone is part of the outreach — that’s how we roll.”

Peebles urges others to “own your message as a public power provider. Stay connected — in-person and virtually. Be a champion for your team.”

The utility has amplified its social media efforts over the last 12-18 months, added Puckett. But she said, “word of mouth is still the preferred method of communication in our community.”

“You have to be diverse in your communications, but face-to-face outreach has the greatest impact,” she commented.



The utility's annual customer appreciation day, held each October during Public Power Week, celebrates customers and thanks them for their support, Puckett continued. "Customers are our best advocates," she added.

Past customer appreciation days have featured face-painting, shaved ice, bucket truck rides and a raffle for a total of \$5,000 in credits to customers' electric bills.

"We feel we have a high level of customer engagement, but we can do more," Peebles said. "We're always seeking more effective ways to communicate with customers. We want to be smart in how we expand our communications."

Peebles said in the past, it's been particularly challenging to fill open lineman jobs. Previously, an externally

posted position went unfilled for several months. Recently, OEU opened a lineman position and got several qualified candidates within three weeks. "That tells me we're doing something right," he said.

Like any utility, Ocala has dealt with employee turnover. Sometimes employees retire but other times they leave to "chase the money" offered by other utilities and the private sector. Peebles said that six of those former employees who left to work at contracting firms came back to Ocala over the last eight months. "We want Ocala to be a career destination," he said.

The strength of Ocala's relationships with its customers may get tested this year, as sharply rising natural gas costs are translating into higher

customer electricity prices in the form of a PCA or Power Cost Adjustment. But the utility is going into that challenge with a strong base of community support. "High fuel prices are everywhere and unfortunately we are all experiencing the impact," said Peebles.

Laurie Zink, development and community outreach director of the Ocala Institute for Human and Machine Cognition (IHMC), explained: "OEU has continually been open to and supportive of innovative ideas that focus on education, community engagement, arts and culture and lifelong learning. Their support assists many organizations in providing services and programs which make [our] community a dynamic and creative place to live and work. We at IHMC, thank OEU for their continued support and look forward to many more initiatives together in the future." ■



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